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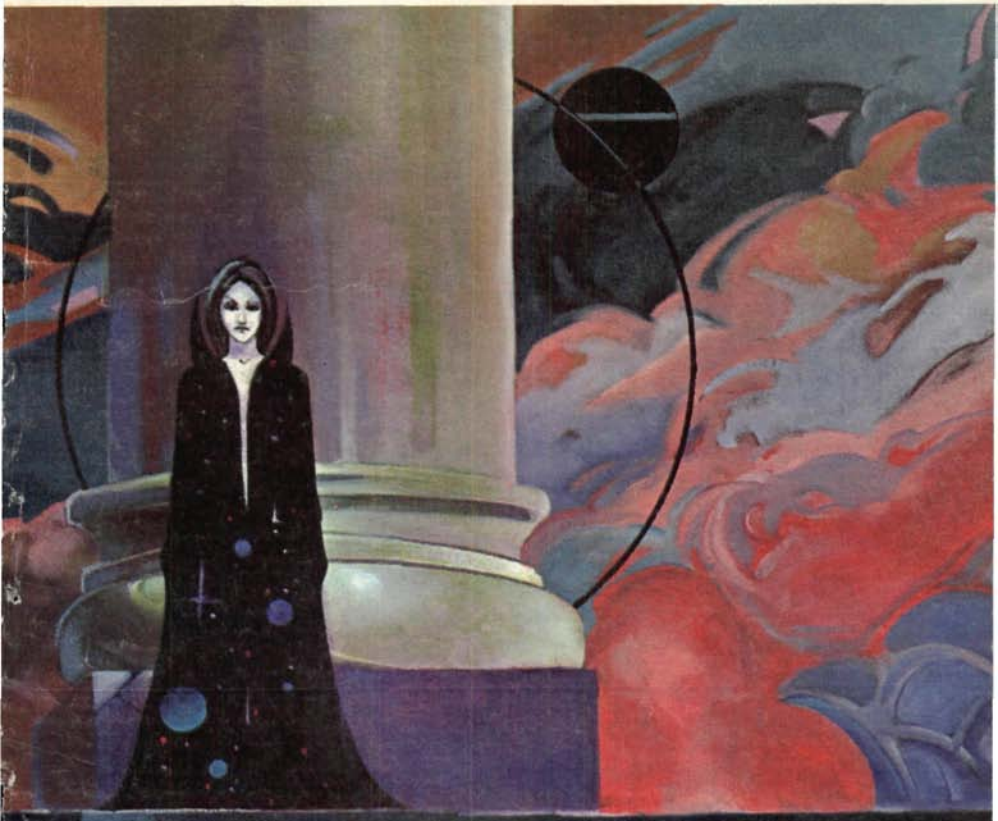
FANTASTIC stories

ruary 1971

ANCY by **David Redd** • A SOUL SONG TO THE SAD, SILLY, SOARING SIXTIES by **Barry N. Malzberg** • BOWERBIRD by **Verge Foray**
HOW ELLIOT MET JEANIE by **Laurence Littenberg**

and- the breathless conclusion of
THE SHAPE CHANGER by Keith Laumer



plus-
provocative columns by FRITZ LEIBER and ALEXEI PANSHIN

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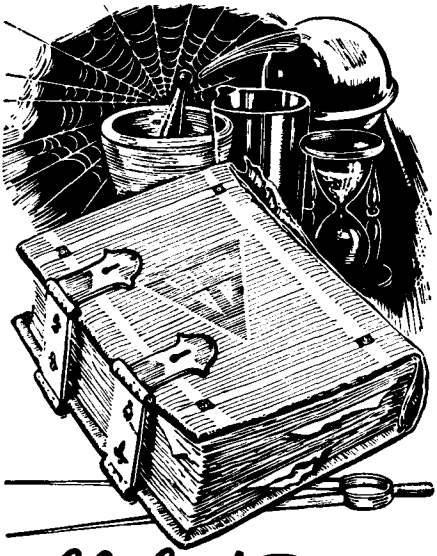

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FANTASTIC

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FANTASTIC, Vol. 20, No. 3, FEBRUARY, 1971 is published bi-monthly by **ULTIMATE PUBLISHING CO., INC. 69-62 230 Street, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364.** Editorial office: Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364. Business office: Purchase, N.Y. Box 175, Portchester, N.Y. at 60¢ a copy. Subscription rates: One year (6 issues). United States and possessions: $3.00; Canada and Pan American Union countries: $3.50; all other countries $4.00. Change of address notices, undeliverable copies, orders for subscriptions, and other mail items are to be sent to Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364. Second Class Postage paid at Flushing, N.Y. and at additional mailing office. Copyright 1970 by Ultimate Publishing Co., Inc. All rights reserved. Editorial contributions must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care; however, publisher assumes no responsibility for return or safety of art work, photographs, or manuscripts.

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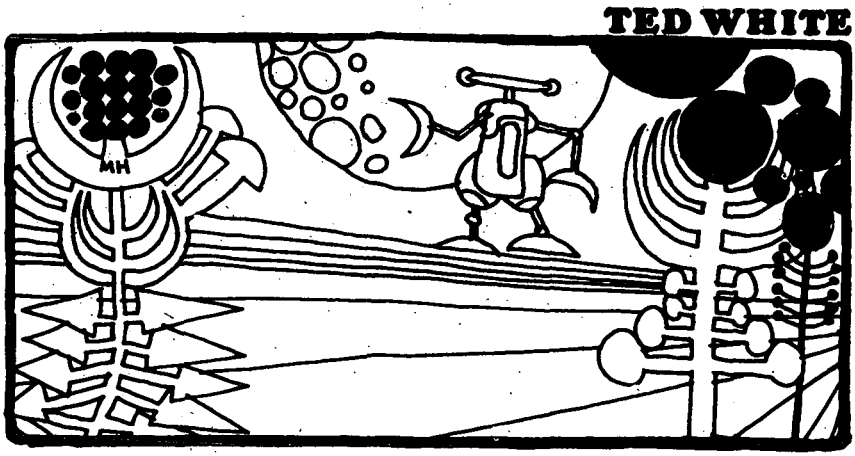

EDITORIAL

For two years, now—since I assumed the editorship of this magazine—I've been receiving an average of two or three letters a month asking me when the third of my Qar series of books would be published. (I'm not being immodest; I'm sure the new editions of the first two books Lancer published last winter sparked some of this continuing interest, and the fact that I am easily accessible here undoubtedly made it more handy for readers who were writing anyway to tag on a question or two.) In any event, I can announce that I've completed the third novel, *Quest of the Wolf*, and that its first third will appear here next issue as a 25,000-word novella, "Wolf Quest." (The novel was written in three parts, and the first stands as a complete work.) The novella deals with the son of Max Quest, as he embarks upon a search for this father in the desert from which that man came.

As a companion-piece in the same issue, we'll have John Brunner's latest Traveller in Black novellet, "Dread Empire." It weighs in at 15,000 words, and if your response to his "The Wager Lost By Winning" is any example, this should make the April issue a blockbuster.

You've probably noticed that when possible we've alternated between issues in which we run two-part serials, and issues in which we publish complete, short novels or novellas. It didn't start out as a deliberate policy, but nonetheless that's the way our scheduling has resolved itself. Just to whet your appetite for issues to come, I should mention, then, that the next serial we have lined up for FANTASTIC is a major new novel by Poul Anderson, "The Byworlder."

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 112)

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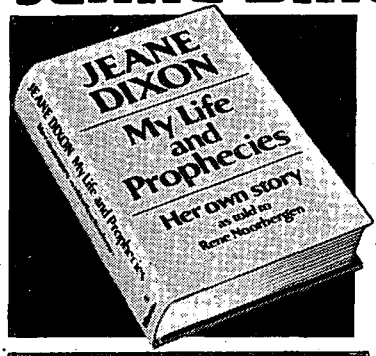
JEANE DIXON PREDICTS



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BOWERBIRD VERGE FORAY

Illustrated by MICHAEL HINGE

This is Howard L. Myers' last story under the name "Verge Foray," the by-line he first used in the sf field. In it we meet Otto Hoffmann, a very realistic man . . . and Foray mixes his own brand of sarcastic story-telling with Myers' more gentle probing of human character . . .

EVEN IN AN AGE when technology had reduced almost all gemstones to baubles, the Alversen Diamonds were beyond man's power to duplicate. They were priceless, and astonishing in beauty. And their theft from the National Space Museum in Houston was little short of a national calamity.

Two weeks later the FBI was still looking for its first useful clue. And the President was turning on the heat and making "suggestions".

"Try to see this the President's way," urged Attorney General Larkle. "Congress is acting salty, the TV comics are making jokes, and the public is annoyed. Maybe the public is frightened, too. A theft like this is enough to make anybody feel unsafe! It's only natural for the President to want somebody he has faith in on the case."

FBI Director Caude retorted angrily, "Sure, but the President doesn't have to *work* with Otto Hoffmann! He doesn't know what an unbearable bitchtard that guy is! Damn it, I've never run into a *criminal* who could touch Hoffmann for pure despicability!"

"I know," the Attorney General nodded glumly. "I've worked with him before, myself. But we have to admit, Caude, that Hoffmann has shown he can make sense out of situations that stump everybody else. Anyway, the President says get him, so why fight it?"

"Oh, I'm not fighting it! Fact is, I ordered him brought in last night, and word came a couple of hours ago that my agents have located him and are bringing him in now. But I'll be damned if this makes sense to me! We lose maybe half a dozen starships a year, plus a lot of good men, and nobody turns a hair! But let a couple of gaudy rocks get stolen and the whole country's in a swivet!" He paused, and then brightened. "Say, maybe Hoffmann will refuse the assignment. He was pretty burned up at me the last time he did an FBI job!"

"Don't count on it," said the Attorney General. "I hear he's hurting for money and his ex-wife's bugging

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him for back alimony."

At that moment the door opened and Otto Hoffmann himself, with the form and demeanor of an enraged grizzly bear, lumbered in to stand before Caude's desk.

"Okay, fuzz-master," he snarled. "What now?"

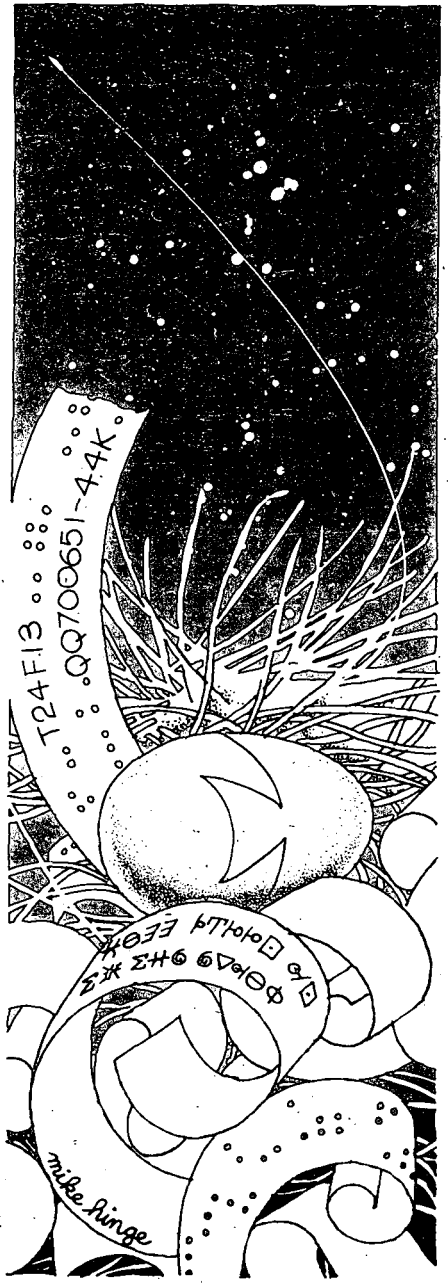
Hoffman's face, like the faces of many people, wore a perpetual scowl. But whereas most scowls come from squinting in the sun too long, or from long hours of brow-puckering thought, Hoffmann's scowl was the genuine article—the exterior display of a loathing (and therefore loathful) inner man.

His small pig-eyes were nearly lost in the vast, ugly, booze-bloated face that hunched above an equally booze-bloated body. Nor did the scars of numerous brawls enhance his appearance, although these disfigurements were old and faded. Hoffman had gained a reputation as a "mean drunk," and bar-room habitues had learned not to tangle with him.

But he was a man of rare ability. The story was that his gift came from an unusual upbringing, from a crack-pot father who had taught him at an early age that man's greatest sin was self-deception. As a result Hoffmann saw the world with eyes unobscured by man's stock of comforting fantasies, and this made him very wise. He saw himself the same way, and this made him very bitter.

"Good morning, Mr. Hoffmann," Caude said, trying to be pleasant. "I hope my agents didn't interrupt—"

"Skip the small-talk, fuzz!" barked Hoffmann. "What's the deal?"



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"We, er, wish to engage your services on a case—"

"My fee is one million dollars, payable in advance!"

"*A million? In advance?*" gasped Attorney General Larkle. "Surely you must be joking, Hoffmann! The amount is out of the question, and payment in advance is against regulations!"

"Look, tumble-tongue, the last time you guys suckered me to do your work for you, I waited ten months for my pay, and then had to go to court to get it! This time I don't start until I have Uncle Skinflint's check certified and deposited! Otherwise, you figure out for yourself what happened to the Alversen Diamonds!"

Caude's eyes narrowed. "Who told you this was about the Alversen Diamonds?" he demanded.

Hoffmann sneered, "Try to hide your imbecility, fuzz! If I had to be told why you needed me, I'd be too stupid to do the job in the first place! Well, speak up! I'm not going to stand here all day!"

The men glared at him for an instant, then Larkle said, "I'm prepared to give you a check for five hundred thousand now, and the remaining five hundred thousand will be paid upon your successful solution of the case."

"Okay," said Hoffmann.

"Okay?" asked Larkle in surprise.

"Sure. Give me the check. As soon as it's deposited in my account I'll be ready to go to work. But I know damn well I'll never see that second half-million!"

Feeling as if he had been had, Larkle complied. Was this all Hoffmann had *expected* to get? he wondered. No matter. Hoffmann had probably guessed the FBI would never have brought him in except for orders from On High, so the dickering advantage had been on Hoffmann's side.

With the check in his beefy hand, Hoffmann said, "I'll be back in half an hour. Get the case file out for me to go over. And bring Alversen in for a conference this afternoon."

"Bring Mr. Alverson *in*? We couldn't do *that!*"

"Why not? Your strong-arm goons didn't apologize about dragging *me* out of bed!"

"But—but we—he's *Hank Alversen!*" sputtered Caude.

"And the law is a respecter of persons!" snarled Hoffmann. "Oh, never mind! If you won't bring him in, arrange for us to go to him! This afternoon!" He stuffed the check in a pocket and stomped out of the office.

"He's right about one thing!" Larkle growled. "He'll never see that second five hundred thousand, the arrogant s.o.b.!"

"Hell! He put you over a barrel as it was!" complained Caude in disgust. "Do you realize I don't earn five hundred thousand in ten years?"

Larkle nodded and grinned. "Don't take it too hard, Caude. I don't mean to let him keep that money."

"Oh," said Caude, and he grinned, too.

WHEN OTTO HOFFMANN returned from the bank he settled his bulk behind a vacant desk and read through the file on the Alversen

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Diamonds theft. This, thought Caude, was a waste of time, because there was precious little in the file that had not been in the newscasts.

And everyone knew the story of the gems and their great discoverer, Henry Alversen.

While still in his early twenties, Alversen had been the first man to penetrate the asteroid belt beyond Mars. Afterward, the young NSA pilot had gone on to be the first explorer of the Jovian satellites, and still later he had captained the initial expedition to Saturn.

He was only thirty-five when the starship drive was developed, but he gracefully stepped aside to allow other men the glory of leading the long voyages to the stars. Much remained to be explored within the sun's own system, and Alversen was content to follow through the work he had begun. He surveyed hundreds of the bare rocks and metallic chunks of the asteroid belt. And he set a record for the closest orbital approach to the surface of Jupiter—a record that still stood unchallenged thirty years later.

He found the diamonds in the course of these explorations. The find made him a millionaire many times over, but the discovery had its frustrating side. His report told the story:

He was surveying a small but unusually dense chunk in the asteroid belt when a glittering reflection from deep in a metallic crevice caught his eye. Fascinated and curious, he put a ramjack in the crevice and pried the walls apart, breaking loose a large section of the brittle planetoid in the process. He drifted down to the source of the glitter, and found the partially exposed surface of a globe only a few feet in diameter, a globe with a curiously "manufactured" look. Certainly there was no doubt that the large gems studding its surface had been cut and faceted by some intelligent being.

Two of the gems were loose enough for him to pick free and stow in his pouch. But as he studied the task of releasing the entire globe from the mass of the planetoid, he became aware that the section he had pried free in opening the crevice was drifting away quite rapidly, and his ship was anchored to that chunk.

He dived after his ship, but several minutes passed before he caught up with it. By the time he had boarded it and released the anchor, his treasure trove had drifted out of sight in a direction he could not guess. He spiraled his ship in the vicinity for days of futile search before giving up.

The loss was deplorable, not merely because of the unique qualities of the two diamonds he did bring back, but because the globe was almost certainly a relic of a highly-advanced civilization. There had been speculation since the first telescopic sightings of the asteroids that these fragments were the remains of a planet, perhaps bearing life, that had once occupied the wide orbital gap between Mars and Jupiter. But no fossils or other relics had been found, which made Alversen's Diamonds, and his report of the object they had decorated, of unique interest. Also, no semblance of intelligent life had been found within the seven-parsec sphere

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of space explored by the starships. The diamonds were man's only evidence that he was not totally alone in all space and time.

And the diamonds had a feature far beyond man's power to duplicate: the planes of their crystalline structure were not flat. The plane that had paralleled the surface of their globular mounting had a positive curvature approximating that of the globe's surface. The diamonds had, in effect, been "wrapped around" the small segments of the globe they had covered. How that curving had been achieved was a matter of considerable scientific debate. Most experts agreed that nothing less than a gravitational field too concentrated to be found in nature—so intense that it created a closed spacewarp in its vicinity—would yield an environment in which such "bent" diamonds could crystallize. The creatures who produced this gravitational field must have been highly advanced, indeed.

The loss of the major portion of his find seemed to take the drive out of Alversen. He returned to Earth, sold the diamonds to the U.S. government, and never ventured into space again. A man of wealth as a result of the sale, and of immense prestige, he lived in pleasant (if perhaps melancholy) retirement.

As for the diamonds, they had been studied, marveled at, speculated over, and finally installed in a special gallery on the top floor of the National Space Museum. Millions of people filed past the well-protected display case to gaze at their clear, wondrous beauty. And then one night they were stolen.

It was strictly a space-age theft, one that would have been impossible a very few decades earlier. Even now, the FBI's experts were hard-pressed to explain just what types of equipment had been used to nullify the surveillance systems, and to muffle the noise made when a gaping hole was torn through the museum's roof.

AT LAST Otto Hoffmann tossed the file aside with a disdainful snort. He got up and stomped into Caude's office. "I'm going to drink some lunch, fuzz," he said. "When I get back I want to go see old Heroic Hank."

"You can eat on the clopter," said Caude, rising. "I've been in touch with Mr. Alversen. He said to come whenever we wished."

He led the way to the roof where a large-cabin clopter was waiting. The Attorney General was already aboard, and the clopter was quickly in the air speeding westward. Ninety minutes later it drifted down on the Alversen estate in the Rockies. The three men were ushered into the spacious, cheerful living room where Alversen himself made them welcome.

Now in his seventies, Alversen still had the warm sincerety that had always endeared him to close friends, casual acquaintances, and to the public at large. Age had, if anything, actually improved him by contributing a quiet dignity to his bearing.

Larkle and Caude, grumpy and morose from their long clopter ride with the unbearable Hoffmann, brightened immediately in the warmth of Alversen's presence. Hoffmann sulked while they chatted gaily with

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their host.

Finally they got down to business. "As Caude told you on the phone, Hank," said Larkle, "we have asked Mr. Hoffmann to assist us in the diamond theft case, and he wishes to ask you some questions."

Alversen nodded and smiled at Hoffmann. "I'll be most happy to tell you anything I know, Mr. Hoffmann," he said, "but frankly, I don't see how I can be of much help in this deplorable matter."

"Thanks," Hoffmann said ungraciously. "Suppose you start by telling me how you came by the diamonds in the first place."

Alversen looked briefly startled, then said, "Very well, though I doubt if I can recall, after all these years, anything more than you will find in the published reports. But here goes: I was conducting a sampling-survey in the asteroid belt, time-space coordinates T24F13 something-or-other, QQ700651 dash 445K, when I spotted a planetoid roughly 200 meters long by—"

"*Hold it!*" Hoffmann snapped peevishly, waving his arms. "I know that bilboesque yarn as well as you do! It's time to come clean, Alversen! Let's have the real poop!"

"*Bilboesque?*" hissed the scandalized Attorney General. "*Come clean?* Really, Hoffmann! We didn't bring you out here to insult Mr. Alversen! Hank, I must apologize, but perhaps you know something of Hoffmann by repute. He's . . . he's . . ." The Attorney General stopped, unequal to the task of finding words to define the obnoxiousness of Otto Hoffmann.

"He's a *realist!*" Hoffmann himself supplied. "That's what I am, Alversen, a realist! I'm a man with damn few illusions—about the universe or my stinking fellow-man! I was a realist even as a child, the first time I ever heard your fairy tale about finding those diamonds! Let's have the facts this time!"

Alversen was displaying the shocked puzzlement with which the innocent often react to absurd accusations. "I don't . . ." he began, "I . . . I really don't know what to say to you, Mr. Hoffmann! I can only tell you what happened! I can't *invent* a different story for you!"

"Sure you could!" sneered Hoffmann. "You're a good inventor of stories! Listen to me, Alversen! The human race acts foolishly enough when it has accurate knowledge for a guide. When its knowledge is wrong, it acts like a damned idiot! And you've handed the world a hunk of nonsense that could make us behave stupidly enough to get ourselves killed!" He stared disgustedly at the old spaceman and added, "If you don't tell your story straight, I will! It'll sound better coming from you!"

Alversen glanced helplessly at the others and shrugged, "What do I say to this may? Is this some kind of joke?"

"Not one we're in on, I assure you!" huffed Larkle. "Hoffmann, if this is the best you can do—"

"Keep your cool, mouthpiece!" growled Hoffmann, "I know what I'm doing! Maybe you guys don't know about bowerbirds."

"Bowerbirds?"

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"Yeah. They live in Australia and New Guinea. Very amusing animals, and instructive to observe. They get their name from the male bird's habit of building a grass bower in mating season. Then he decorates his bower with bright flowers, leaves, pebbles, pieces of glass—anything that might catch the females' fancy. A lot of ornament stealing goes on, and the sharpest cock winds up with the pick of the decorations in his bower. That gives him the pick of the hens, which makes the system practical."

The FBI Director was glaring fiercely at him. "Hoffmann," he stormed, "if you're trying to tell us a bowerbird stole the Alversen Diamonds, I swear I'll have you committed!"

"You're close, fuzz, close!" leered Hoffmann with mock approval. "I'm telling you that a creature which frequently displays bowerbird-like behavior stole the diamonds! Of course an ordinary bowerbird couldn't have done it, but this creature could."

"What creature?"

Hoffmann flicked a thumb toward Alversen. "That one!"

"This is ridiculous!" protested Alversen. "I haven't been near the Space Museum in five years!"

"Who said you had?" demanded Hoffmann. "You didn't steal the diamonds from the museum! Nobody did!"

"*What?*" yelped the Attorney General. "That's nonsense! They're gone, aren't they?"

Hoffmann shrugged and looked sourer than usual. Finally he said, "Gents, I'm going to kick some of your most cherished beliefs to death, so steel yourselves to bear up under the grief.

"First, Heroic Hank here is no incorruptible paragon. The bowerbird in his soul was too much for him! But don't think too unkindly of him. Each of us contains a touch of bowerbird, along with touches of mouse, skunk, snake, peacock, and so on. Sometimes I wonder if the difference between man and the lower animals is merely that man can choose, from one moment to the next, which other animal's instinctive behavior would best suit his needs." Hoffmann grinned crookedly and added, "For example, I am now copying the hawk, or maybe the buzzard.

"Second, we don't have this neck of the universe to ourselves, as everybody likes to think—though Alversen knows better! In reality we're a minor lifeform around here!"

"Our ships have explored the planets of dozens of stars," the Attorney General observed ponderously, "and have found no trace of past or present intelligent life!"

"Naturally not!" snapped Hoffmann impatiently. "Why should superior life hang around something as undependable as a star! *They* wouldn't be living on planets at all! Look. You know there are more dwarf stars than giant stars. Right? And it follows there are more sub-dwarfs than dwarfs. The smaller stellar bodies are, the more numerous they're likely to be. Within five light-years of the sun is only one other bright-star system, Alpha Centauri, but there has to be dozens of small stars closer than that—stars too small to radiate noticable light, but big

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enough to have slow nuclear fission processes in their interiors to provide them with warm surfaces and atmospheres.

"I'm not making all this up! Sub-dwarfs are in astronomy textbooks—not mentioned often, I admit, but that's because man isn't much interested in little dark stars that have enough gravity and atmosphere to crush him! But life could evolve on such a world and find it quite satisfactory . . . plenty of surface on a world that size to let a society spread itself out! And plenty of similar worlds just light-weeks away, to colonize or to trade with! And a very stable energy situation, because a world like that could outlast two or three suns!

"That's where *The* People live in this neck of the universe, gents! *The* People! We, a particular breed of animals, live in what The People must consider barren waste, on a cold little clinker near a scorching ball of gas that throws all sorts of deadly radiation at us! A fit place for bowerbirds, maybe, but not for The People!"

Alversen smiled. "What you say about the existence of sub-dwarfs is accurate enough, Mr. Hoffmann. But when you speak of these so-called People, I'm afraid you're fantasizing!"

"No, I'm *real*-izing!" countered Hoffmann. "I don't miss on telling reality from non-reality, Alversen! Do you think the FBI hired me for my personal charm? You're licked, Heroic Hank! Why don't you give up and confess?"

Alversen chuckled uncomfortably. "It's your story," he shrugged. "Go on with it."

"Okay. The People would be curious enough to explore some of our planets, and naturally, they would be most interested in planets that came closest to offering them a livable environment. If they sent a research team to the sun's system, the team would probably go to Jupiter, our biggest planet. The weather would be chilly for them, but the gravity and air pressure would be almost enough for comfort.

"But one thing would be the same for them and us—the economics of spaceflight. They wouldn't land their spaceship on Jupiter. They would leave it in orbit, and go down to the surface in small shuttle-ships."

He eyed Alversen coldly. "That's where you found the diamonds, Alversen—in a ship they left in orbit around Jupiter! Aside from fooling around in the asteroids, you're also the man who made the closest fly-by of the Jovian surface. Close enough to find their parked spaceship! You went aboard, found the diamonds, stole them, and came home with that innocent tale of a relic on an asteroid!

"That tale had to be nonsense! Maybe a diamond would survive a billion years in an asteroid, practically exposed to open space, but it wouldn't wind up looking like it had been cut yesterday, with all its facets smooth and shiny! Nobody should have believed your story for a minute, but it was *your* story, and you were the unblemished hero! Besides, your tale put this frightening supercivilization a comforting billion years in the past! So everybody politely pushed reality aside to make way for your fantasy!"

"This is the wildest thing I've ever

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heard!" laughed Alversen, getting to his feet. "Who would like a drink?"

Larkle and Caude declined numbly, but Hoffmann said, "If that invitation extends to me, I could do with a shot."

"Certainly," smiled Alversen, going to his bar. "I'm not the thin-skinned sort who would take this personally, Mr. Hoffmann! You were hired to do an important and difficult job for our country, and I sympathize with the vigor and, I'm sure, the sincerety, with which you're trying to do it." He downed a stiff jolt of bourbon, then refilled his glass and brought it, along with Hoffmann's drink, over from the bar. "But there are one or two points in your version that don't jibe with what I would call reality. You say I boarded an alien spaceship, swiped some diamonds, and scurried home. Mr. Hoffmann, surely you realize that the knowledge I could have gained aboard such a ship would be worth far more than all the diamonds I could carry!"

Hoffmann nodded and slurped his drink. "That's true, but I'm not criticizing you for taking the diamonds instead. I probably couldn't have done much better myself! That ship must have been incomprehensible, and terrifying. The diamonds were probably the only things you saw that had any meaning to you. In your fright, you couldn't have done much thinking, anyway. You could only react, and with the diamonds staring you in the face, you reacted like a bowerbird."

"I see," grinned Alversen. "Then why didn't these aliens come after me to get their diamonds back?"

"They did! That's why I said the diamonds weren't stolen from the museum. They were reclaimed by their rightful owners!"

"If that's true, why did they do it so sneakily?"

"Not sneakily, but gently, when nobody was in the museum to get hurt," said Hoffmann. "Suppose an Australian rancher is out in his yard, looking at something through a magnifying glass. He leaves the glass there, and the next time he needs it he looks in the yard for it and it's gone. He's seen bowerbirds around, and reasons that one of them took it. This doesn't make him *mad* at the birds! He understands their instincts. So he goes to the area where the local birds have their bowers, and since his glass was a top prize that would have found its way into the top cock's bower, he gently pulls back the wall of that bower, takes his glass, and goes his way.

"That's what happened to the diamonds. When The People were ready to use their ship again, they saw the diamonds were gone (and I would guess the diamonds weren't there for looks but were parts of the ship's working gear). The People would have noticed us, of course, and watched us as we do bowerbirds, with amusement and mild curiosity. So they would have known the NSA was a sort of pluralized top cock in our society, and would have gone straight to NSA's bower, the Space Museum, to retrieve the diamonds."

Hoffmann finished his drink and looked around at Larkle and Caude, as if studying the effect of his words on them. He sneered at what he saw in their faces.

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The Attorney General said in a tight voice, "I'll be a long time apologizing satisfactorily for exposing you to this *arrogant nonsense, Hank! I'm truly* sorry! May I use your phone for an urgent call?"

"Of course," smiled Alversen, looking a bit saddened.

Larkle went to the phone and punched a number. The screen lighted to display the face of the president of the bank in which Hoffmann had deposited his check. The banker smiled in recognition.

"Hi, Pete," he said.

"Hello, Tony," said the Attorney General. "Tony, you have an account for one Otto Hoffmann. I'm hereby impounding that account, on the grounds that Hoffmann defrauded the government out of the five hundred thousand he deposited earlier today."

"All right, Pete. Put through the official notice within six hours, won't you?"

"Okay. But do you mind checking to make sure you have the account?"

"Just a second." The face disappeared briefly, then came back to say, "Yes, we have it. Name of Otto Hoffmann, with a federal check that size deposited today."

"That's the one! Impound it!"

"Right . . . but Pete . . . one thing . . ."

"What's that?" asked Larkle.

"There's only two thousand in the account. Hoffmann made the deposit, and then wrote checks to cover almost the whole amount. Three hundred thousand to Internal Revenue Service, one hundred and twenty thousand to a prepayment trust for a Mrs. Stella Ebert Hoffmann (sounds like he's paying alimony, doesn't it?), and there's one check marked 'one year's *rent', and another for a twelve-month* triple-A dining card, and several marked 'payment of account in full'. Only two thousand left. But I'll impound that."

"*Forget the whole thing!*" bawled the Attorney General, slapping the phone off with a furious gesture.

Hoffmann grinned with gloating triumph. "Let's see you start, big shyster," he snickered, "by conning IRS out of three hundred thousand!"

"Go to hell!" grated the Attorney General.

"Hadn't we better leave?" Caude murmured to him.

"Yeah, let's get this s.o.b. outta here!" Larkle barked. "Again, Hank, my deepest apologies!"

Alversen nodded and smiled forgivingly.

"Just one more thing," said Hoffmann. "Alversen, I want to remind you of something I said a while ago. You've got the world believing a dangerous lie, one that could get the whole human race smeared but good! Let's get back to that Australian rancher. When he went to recover his property the first time, he was good-humored about it. But suppose the next time it happened he was badly inconvenienced and got angry. The Bowerbirds would no longer be a bunch of amusing goofs; they would suddenly be a damned nuisance! He would go after them with his gun!" Hoffmann rose and lumbered toward the door. "Well, so long, Heroic Hank! Sleep well tonight! One of the billions

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of lives you're endangering is mine, if you want a cheerful thought to sleep on!"

"Wait," said Alversen quietly.

They turned to look at him.

"The damned s.o.b.'s right," he gritted. "He's mixed up on some of the details—but he's right. I did lie about the diamonds, and I suppose the rightful owners took them from the museum. It's hard to explain any other way."

Larkle and Caude sat down again, looking stunned.

"My God!" said Caude at last. "We can't let this get out! It would ruin Hank completely!"

Alversen lowered his head. "Thanks for considering me, but at my age it doesn't matter so much. I made the mistake, and I'm ready to pay for it."

Hoffmann snorted caustically but didn't speak.

"But this could play hell with morale, Hank!" protested Larkle. "The public needs heroes, and it needs them untarnished! I think we'd better hush the whole thing! Hoffmann's talking malarky about the danger, anyway, so there's no need to issue a warning about the aliens. If Hoffmann's summary is true, as you say it is, Hank, then the aliens have shown themselves to be highly civilized and, um, forebearing. If a human should offend them again, surely they will merely get in touch with us, to warn us."

Alversen shook his head: "We can't be sure of that, and the risk is too great to take."

"Some slight risk perhaps," argued the Attorney General. "But isn't it far more likely that they would prefer to talk it out with us?"

Hoffmann sneered and helped himself to some more of Alversen's liquor. "Tell me, big shyster," he demanded. "How likely are *you* to start a conversation with a *bowerbird*?"

The silence that followed was long and uncomfortable. —Verge Foray

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

In the April, 1971 *FANTASTIC*— At last! The long-awaited sequel to *Phoenix Prime:* Ted White's WOLF QUEST, a complete short novel! *Plus* John Brunner's newest epic novella of the Traveller in Black, DREAD EMPIRE! *Also* new short stories by exciting young writers, and our usual provocative features!

COMING NEXT MONTH

In the March, 1971 *AMAZING STORIES*— The novel everyone will be talking about *next* year, Hugo and Nebula Award-winner Ursula K. Le Guin's THE LATHE OF HEAVEN! This one *can't* be missed!

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If we are all that we have experienced, and the ubiquity of the media brings all experiences to us, well, then, is it not possible that in some one among us everything will recapitulate? That somewhere, locked in a small room in a large city, an uncomprehending man might find himself singing—

A SOUL SONG TO THE SAD, SILLY, SOARING SIXTIES

BARRY N. MALZBERG

DEAR JOE:

I really can't stand much more of this now but it is so difficult to explain exactly what it is like I can only tell you that it is a sensation of lost control and then reenactment, perpetual reenactment of the simplest, most horrible acts, known again and again in that kind of timeless banality which perhaps can be ascribed also to sex and death but it isn't that simple; ah God I tell you it's all crumbling fast and

MEMPHIS: He stood there in the dim wash, watching the fading greyness above intersect with concrete, all of it melding and mudling toward the colors of night, feeling the strain inside his collar, grasping for coolness, looking absently toward the balcony: from this level it was impossible to get any kind of perspective; it was only a kind of dimunition, fading really, the sense of figures at some vast remove from him and then in the midst of scurrying he felt all of it moving away from him, graceless, toward some dark conjoinment of its own and he was falling, falling, into a centrality so persuasive that

Dear Natalie:

You see the reason it didn't work out had nothing to do with emotional factors or that question of "reluctance" which you ascribed to me. I was not reluctant and again and again women will project their worst sexual fears and tensions on men. No, Natalie, it was a question of simply not being able to function any more; I have no idea whether you can understand the level at which I was operating last summer, perhaps on the outside it all seemed the same to you: the same weariness, the same charade, the faithful old gestures but inside there was this feeling of sliding imbalance, all sensation, memory, trundling merrily, madly down a hillside to fall with a dim clatter it was still within the bounds of reasonable control then you understand but by September it had become and I able to leave but it was nothing personal oh God it is so impossible

CHICAGO: There was nothing, in the center of the fire then that high, dead stricken silence so common to disaster at the point where it begins to

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turn past occurrence toward inevitability and he thought at that instant then that he could see all of it laying out before him; perhaps it was only the history of the nation that was at issue but it seemed to go beyond that, seemed in fact to be his own vision: he was lying on a table and they were beating him, methodically, carefully; it was all a question of surgery and what they were doing was for medical purposes only; they were, then, eviscerating him carefully, tenderly, lovingly, all a question of health but he screamed and screamed anyway, doubtless inattentive of their skills and at that moment the vision broke and he was running, running; there were stones in the air, fire in the dusk, screams in the center and he held on to the shoulder of a young girl, running, running, all of the threads of disaster seeming to spiral out from him, bright with meaning, foul with blood, circling through all the corridors of meaning as the club caught him neatly at skull center and imploded consciousness, reason, memory, possibility in a thick grinding spray that leapt toward darkness.

I must try to make some sense of this diary, not really a diary but notes to myself; I do not know what is happening. I must try to set it down right. What am I, a microcosm? Am I supposed to re-enact it personally? But I really had nothing to do with it. I watched half of it on television and the other half I only heard about and that it would come to focus in me it's too complex to be insanity, I didn't think that there was such *corporeality* in madness. Maybe it's just the job, just a question of too much pressure then what I'm trying to say is that it's obviously gone too far

DALLAS: Oh his wife was beautiful, he had such a fine wife for all her faults—she was a little vicious and stupid but then they all were and she had her reasons too—and her smile so fine amidst the roses, her body good and warm inside the nestling pink and at that moment he could have fucked her for joy the bitch up on the front seat saying how much they loved him and he reached out to touch her, just a twinkle, just a brush but before he could get his bearings he was moving forward with astonished speed, diminishing gnome and then they caught him in dead-center with the spray and he knew the sonsofbitches had him, they always cut down outlanders when they came in without the proper credentials. And fell, fell, into the absorbing blackness, curiosity his only emotion as he tumbled into the swelter of the night, the screams and squeals of his wife punctuating the heave and billow of his mortality.

Dear Mr. Simmons:

I am truly sorry to tell you in response to your note that I do not think I will be able to return to my job as an investigator for the Bureau. I have had a slight illness which is not serious and is in fact very slight but has made me realize that a number of things in my life must change and I am still too indisposed to go out. Perhaps at some time in the future we will be able to discuss this; in the meantime, if

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you would simply mail me my check I

ARLINGTON: Ah the bastard, he had him lined up good in the sights, the revisionist son of a bitch, always talking and talking about his plans, his meaning, the new order but at heart a jew-lover like the rest of them, that was the whole thing; the bastards were in such control that they could even hire the anti-semites to keep the Americans at bay with their easy platitudes but enough of that; he had him dead-center and pulled the trigger with a flourish, seeing the bastard tumble and fall, a Chevrolet, no less, a cheap Chevrolet was the only thing he could drive and in the clear, dead space which the bastard had left vacated he saw a vision then and the vision was of a cross, a cross of fire on which the Enemies would be impaled and so he knew then

DALLAS: Levelled the bastard right in his sights, the roses, the pink, the bitch in the front seat and imploded his brains with a precision so intense that it could have been a knife and he felt good, he felt good, he felt

All right, I mean, I might have taken this all a little bit more, uh, *intensely* then the average; there's no question but that the papers and the news can fill something of a void and I admit that during most of the decade I haven't lived the most exciting, rewarding, personally satisfying life imaginable and too often I ate dinner with a newspaper instead of a girl and too often I was writing letters to the editor instead of trying to get a day's work done but even so, I thought that most of this essentially was for laughs, I mean, wasn't it for laughs? I always thought that it was a freak show, a comic book brought around in black-and-white and packaged for commercials but if deep inside on some interior level I was taking it

NEW YORK: Oh God he was falling, falling, the sound of the machine guns like giant bees in the air and she was pinned there, pinned by the fire; wanting nothing more than to run to him, to clutch him, to tell him that it was all right but she was afraid, that was the thing; she was afraid too, afraid that the guns might get her and then what would happen to the children her breasts hurt. Oh Malcolm, Malcolm and the blood was moving out over the raised surfaces in enormous rivulets, gleaming and yet dull and still the fire went on; now they were screaming to the right and left of her and finally she could take no more; she got up, began to move there slowly but it was all a weight within her: his death (she knew that he was dead), his blood, her fear, her loss, their terror, the evil and the loneliness and knelt beside him, his eyes closing like doors in his face and took it then, took it as she knew it would look thirty years from now and her cold and old and closed the eye, closed the other eye: the prophet, stoned.

Dear Sirs:
I am interested in obtaining psychiatric treatment at your clinic. I am 31 years old and have been a resident of this city all my life. My life. Recently I have

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 115)

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Surely the most helpless victims of wars are the children. Within the span of only a dozen years we've been confronted by the grim reminders of this fact in countries as geographically separated as Vietnam and Biafra. But what of the children of England... after World War Three—? What of—

NANCY

DAVID REDD

Illustrated by JEFF JONES

NANCY LIVED in our house until she was ten years old. Then she left us.

The day Nancy disappeared we were all playing in the ruins. Everyone except me had been born after the War, but my brother Little Tom was the only odd one—the only one we knew about. We all thought Nancy was normal, even though her parents had died slowly from the radiation, but when she started getting moody some of the adults thought she might be growing up too soon.

The ruins were the best playground we children ever had. We used the roofless walls as fortresses or unexplored continents, roaming through the wrecked buildings until it was time to go home. This particular day, Nancy said she wasn't coming home.

"I be fed up with everything," she said. "And I be fed up with you all!"

"Come thou on home, Nancy. It be getting late." I was the oldest boy in the gang, thirteen, so I had to talk to her.

"I don't care. I'm not coming!"

She had stopped using Oldie-talk, the "secret language" we children spoke among ourselves. That showed she meant what she said, only I didn't realize it then. I thought she was being sulky over something and tried to talk her out of it.

"Come thou on home for thy supper, Nancy. We be all going now."

"No!" Nancy shook her head and dodged away behind a wall. I would have followed her, but the others were getting impatient. I told them to start for home while I collected Little Tom. I thought Nancy would soon change her mind when she saw us leaving.

Forgetting Nancy for the moment, I went into the next ruin to collect Little Tom. He was a real genuine atomic mutant, like in the stories your mothers tell you. In this building water was always dripping from the broken pipes along the wall, and Little Tom had a favourite pipe which he sat sucking all day, spitting out water when his mouth got too wet. He was shaped like a round fat baby, but he never grew bigger and his skin was cold and pale

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white—although they said he had been born pink like anyone else. I went up to my mutant brother and said, "Thou knowest it be time for home, Little Tom," and though he didn't understand the words he knew what I meant by the way I said it. He spat out his water and let me pick him up.

I started carrying Little Tom home, and then I remembered Nancy. Should I go looking for her? But the sun was down and the wind was getting cold, and besides she would probably come home after she was left alone. So I went on home, and when I got there I told our parents about Nancy.

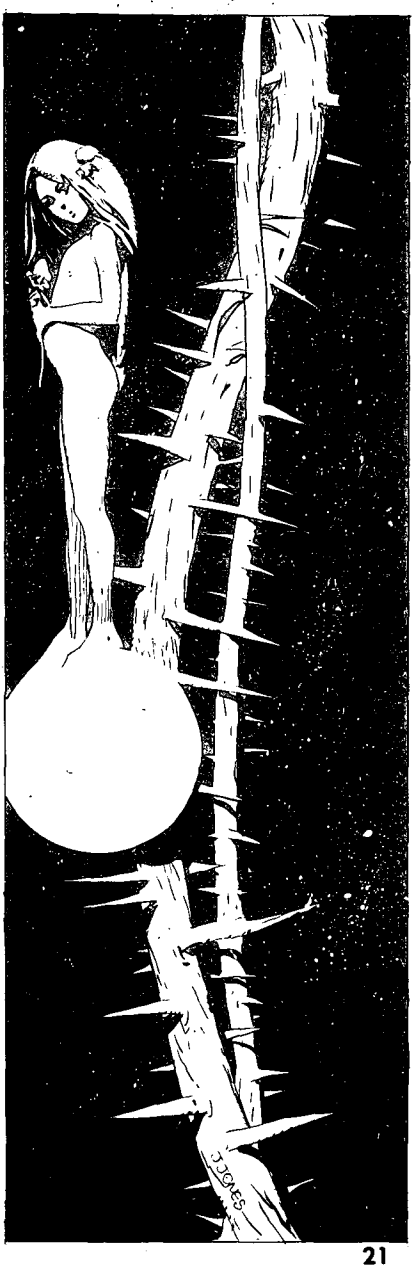
"She'll turn up when she feels like it," they said.

She didn't.

They sent out search parties for her, but they never found her. She'd vanished. I'd been the last person to see her alive. I worried about it for ages— I kept thinking there was something I might have done to save her, if only I'd thought of it. Sometimes I dreamed about her and woke up sweating. It wouldn't have been so bad if she'd simply died, but this way we didn't know what had happened to her. Not knowing was the worst part of it.

Over the next few years I gradually forgot Nancy—I was too busy growing up. I started writing my poems seriously, and when I was fifteen my epic about the atomic war was published. I can still remember some of the lines:

Stole the colour from the sun,
Brought it back and threw it down
Writhing burning on the sand
Falling flaming to the stone.



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Over-written, but vivid—and I was in print. That was only the beginning.

The image of fire kept reappearing in my work. It even coloured my lines about Nancy. She still walked in my dreams, perhaps once a year, and I tried to set down my feelings about her. Somehow the poem changed as I wrote it, becoming the story of a burning female demon who pursued me through endless darkness. It was nothing like the dreams I wanted to put on paper. I destroyed the poem.

After I married Mary I moved to the next village, near the mill where I worked, but I often went back home. I used to walk alone in the countryside around Medway Vale, and I usually came back with a poem or the idea for one. The only place I avoided was the group of ruined buildings where we had played as children. I knew Little Tom now lived in the ruins day and night, eating scraps left for him, but I never went near there. Perhaps it was the thought of Nancy which kept me away.

When I was twenty-three the old Lord Regent handed over power to King Andrew, who had now returned from abroad. After the ceremony at Canterbury, Kind Andrew said that one day London would be rebuilt on the old site, after the radiation died down. The new city would be called Snowdon, as a tribute to the old Regent. I was thinking about these plans on one of my walks, wondering whether the idea of the new city was worth a poem. I was getting near the ruins, or as near the ruins as I ever went, when I saw the girl on the path ahead.

She was standing on the grass with her back to me, looking at the ruins. Her grubby clothes, her corn-coloured hair, and the way she stood, all reminded me of Nancy. This was how she always appeared in my dreams—just as I had known her ten years before. This little girl was extraordinarily like her from behind. Imagination, I told myself. I went up to her.

She turned round as I reached her, and I saw her face. I was stepping back into the past. She was Nancy.

I had lived this moment before, in my dreams, and I knew what to say. I used the "Oldie-talk" I had not spoken for years. "Come thou here, little maid. I would speak with thee."

"It's you," she said. She knew me, despite my beard.

She did not move. She seemed afraid of me. To reassure her I took her hand . . . I touched her. Then I knew this moment was real.

"It's impossible," I said, holding her more tightly.

"That's what they all say," she replied. But it *was* impossible, because I was a grown man and she was still only ten. I realised I must be hurting her, and let her go. She rubbed her hand.

I dreamed of Nancy, and now here she was, unchanged by the years. How?

"Tell me," I said quietly.

"I'm a mutant," she said, still with that unusually grave look on her face. "I can travel in time whenever I want to, just like Mad Billy could teleport himself from place to place. When I left you that day I—I went forward

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into another year."

Travel in time. I believed her. If she had said she had slept in a cave for ten years I would have believed her. I would have believed anything to make this meeting real.

"I understand, Nancy. You're a mutant. But why didn't you stay with us?"

"I couldn't, I couldn't, I had to get away. I shouldn't have come back here now." She gulped. "I'd better go away again."

"Nancy," I said, "don't go now, not when we've just met. It's been so long—for me if not for you. Stay here awhile."

She said nothing for a moment, thinking. Then she smiled. "Well, all right. I might as well stay. Let's go down to the ruins."

"All right," I said. It was good to see her smile. I had always known who my wife reminded me of.

So we walked along the path side by side. We had been children together in those bleak post-war years. Now, for a few moments, I was recapturing that childhood.

"What are you doing out here?" asked Nancy. "Just walking?"

"Yes, just walking. I'm trying to work out a new poem."

"A poem? Do you still write those things?"

"Indeed I do. I told you I'd be famous one day."

She looked up at me. "Are you famous?"

"Yes, I am," I said. My books of poetry were read all over the South, and over the water, and odd copies were slowly spreading north and west along the thin transport routes. If I had lived before the War my name would have been known everywhere in the world. Soon King Andrew would appoint a new Poet Laureate, and he could hardly fail to choose me—no other poet could capture the imaginative spark which fired my work.

"Do you walk around like this specially to think up your poems?" asked Nancy.

"I must be alone to write. On these walks I can get my thoughts in order and work out my poems without being interrupted."

"Except by me," said Nancy.

"You have my full permission to interrupt me any time you want to. I'd rather see you again than commemorate Snowdon in bad verse." And that, of course, was an understatement.

"Snowdon? Are you writing about him?"

"No, I meant Snowdon the city. I've done the Regent before." The old man deserved all the poems he could get—he had held the country together practically single-handed in the first years after the War—but he was not my subject this time. I described the Snowdon City Project to Nancy. "When the London area becomes habitable again they'll rebuild the city on the old street plan. It'll be a visible link between past and future. It was Snowdon's idea, so King Andrew says they'll rename the city Snowdon as a tribute to the old man. Anyway, I thought there might be a poem in it."

"Only I interrupted you," said Nancy, grinning at the thought. "I

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suppose you must write poems about everything you see. Have you written one about those?"

She pointed to the ruins, the walls rising grey and broken from the rubble. We were getting quite close to them.

"Yes, I've done several about them. They're too good a subject to miss."

One of the poems set in the ruins had been about Little Tom. I had written it when we finally realised he would never grow up. Probably Little Tom was still there—he had not died or left the ruins to my knowledge.

"Well," said Nancy, changing the subject, "what do you do when you don't write poems?"

"I help run the village mill. You never thought I'd make a miller, did you? The job suits me, though. With all the machinery there I can usually find a couple of hours off to go looking for inspiration on one of my walks."

"The Poetic Miller!" said Nancy. She was laughing.

"I could have done a lot worse for myself. As it is, I've collected a beard, a roof over my head, a wife and family—"

"In that order?"

I frowned at her, not as severely as I'd intended. "You always were cheeky—I'd forgotten that. No more nonsense now."

She just grinned. "Come on, we're almost there."

She skipped forward into the ruins. I shook my head and went after her. Beneath my feet, the grass gave way to rubble as I followed her. I had dreamed about exploring the ruins with Nancy—I had never thought I would do it again in real life.

I felt cold in the shadows, but Nancy did not seem to notice the chill as we wandered through the ruins.

"Look!" she cried. "There's the place where I ran away from you!"

So it was, the old concrete wall streaked with bird droppings and green algae. She gazed at it for a moment. "It hasn't changed much."

Then she was off again, light-footed, into the next building. This was part of my dreams too. She would dance away and I would run after her, afraid of losing her.

Nancy slipped through a huge crack in the wall; I was close behind her. I saw her take a few paces across the stones, suddenly gasp and stop. She stared at the small white object by the opposite wall.

"That—that's Little Tom!"

"That's right." She had always been nervous of him, I remembered. I laid my hands on her shoulders and looked at my mutant brother. He was sucking his favourite water pipe as usual. He was still the same size, but he had grown white as the years passed until now his little body was the colour of chalk, like a shiny white porcelain statue of a baby.

"Is he alive?" asked Nancy.

I made no reply, for I saw Little Tom move. He slowly pulled his mouth from the metal pipe and spat feebly onto the ground.

Nancy stiffened, turned under my hands and tried to run. I gripped her tightly as she struggled—she would not vanish from me in the ruins a second time. I spoke to her softly. "Little Tom can't hurt you, Nancy. If you've seen enough we'd better go."

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It worked, and she stopped wriggling. I kept her face turned away from the little white form by the pipes. Not letting her go, I guided her out of the buildings. We walked steadily back the way we had come.

When we were clear of the ruins I released her. From the path she took a last look at the grey walls which housed Little Tom. She sighed. "Has he been like that all the time?"

"Yes, he has."

"It's horrible. I don't mind seeing people old all of a sudden, like you, but him . . . He's just stayed the same! I thought I'd left him behind!"

"Left him behind?" Then I remembered what she had said about her ability to travel in time. "Nancy, you can't escape the past. This ten-year leap into the future hasn't done you any good. It would have been far better if you had stayed and grown up with us." I shrugged. "You say you're a mutant—don't you feel any sympathy for Little Tom?"

"No!" She shook her head violently. "I want to get away from all that!"

"Then why did you come back?"

"I wanted to see home again, and I thought he'd be dead by now. I had the most horrible dreams about him, you know. Now I won't dare come back in the future because he might still be alive!"

"You mustn't feel that way about him," I said, and then the meaning of her last sentence hit me. She intended to travel in time again!

"Nancy, you're not going further on into the future, are you?"

"I've already been," she said impatiently.

"But I thought this was your first trip through time," I said, only then beginning to grasp the true extent of her incredible powers.

"I told you, I can do it when I like. Just like Mad Billy could teleport! I've been exploring time for six months since I left you."

I sat down on the turf, hardly seeing the girl in front of me. I had a mental picture of Nancy wandering through the passages of time, opening a door to peer into a room before passing on to another. She could move from year to year like a bee moving from flower to flower.

"Have you been beyond the year two thousand?" I asked—a foolish question, I realised. If she could jump through time at will she would surely have gone into the new millenium.

"Of course I have. I've seen your city Snowdon built and lived in for years, and I've seen your King Andrew die of old age." She still sounded annoyed with me for not understanding.

She had been into the years ahead. She knew the fate of our plans and the fate of our ruler. She must know what would happen to me! *Me!* I stared into her eyes.

"Nancy, will I become Poet Laureate? Will I?" She knew. She had to tell me. "Nancy, you know my future. I can't be forgotten, not with my talent. I've got to become Poet Laureate! They must remember me! They must!"

Nancy looked away, and sighed. "I really shouldn't have come back."

She plucked a daisy from out of the grass and stood holding it in her hand.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 128)

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LAURENCE LITTENBERG

Laurence Littenberg is a nuclear physicist presently working in England. He is also the co-author—with fellow physicist Greg Benford—of "The Prince of New York" in our June, 1970, issue. This time out he carves a strange little vignette of life on the college campus, and tells—

HOW ELIOT MET JEANIE

A TALL, UNCTIOUS MAN in evening clothes stopped Eliot Bien at the door of the Statler. "Are you a Hotel student?" asked the man.

"No."

"Then you can't come through here."

"Everyone cuts through here," insisted Eliot.

"That's just the point," rejoined the man. "That's what we're trying to stop."

"Who are you?" asked Eliot.

"I'm the Manager," replied the man, picking a thread from his sleeve.

"Well, I've got three fraternity brothers in the Hotel School who'll vouch for me."

"Sorry, that won't do."

"You know by hindering me you are incurring the wrath of the physics department," warned Eliot.

"The Hotel School is more than up to the Physics Department these days," said the Manager smugly. "What can you do to us, anyway? The lights, plumbing, and appliances are all handled by the Engineering School and we're very solid with *them* lately. We're thinking of combining our Faculty Balls."

"There are worse things than stopped drains," said Eliot ominously.

"Let's see, it seems I've forgotten just what it is the Physics Department *does*. Boy!" He clapped his hands and a white-jacketed junior page scurried over. "An Arts College catalogue, if you will." The page turned, hopped, and ran.

He was back shortly bearing a red book. "Last year's," announced the Manager disdainfully. The page cringed and hid his face in his hands. "But it will do, I suppose." He dismissed the page with a wave, and began to thumb through the catalogue. ". . . Music, Philosophy, here it is, Physics. Ah yes, here, '. . . the various laws of nature as derived from the basic principle of Cause and Effect.' "

"That's out of date," Eliot interrupted. "Everything's Functional Dependence, now."

"What does that mean in terms of a malediction?"

"Well, the usual departmental curse involves severing the functional dependence. Last year we would have said cutting the link between cause and

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effect. It comes to the same thing."

"I don't think that can hurt us. It's rather too abstract for Hotel people."

"Have it your own way," said Eliot. He stepped back and began chanting:

Let Newton, Maxwell, Einstein, Mach,
Take their physical theories back,
And Fermi, Boltzmann, Curie, Bohr,
Suspend forthwith all natural law.

Eliot had hardly finished when the Manager began intoning the pseudo-Biblical Hotel Curse. "Wherever you shall stop, the innkeeper will say unto you 'We don't think you'd really be *happy* here.' . . ." Eliot wheeled and left before the Manager could finish.

It was nearly two and he would have to hurry to make math. Tuesday's prelim had been extremely difficult and he was anxious to be there when the professor went over it.

One of the students stopped him at the entrance to Olin M. "Do you have your stones?" he asked.

"Stones?"

"Here, take some of these." He reached into a sack and handed Eliot seven flat stones, each about an inch in diameter. "Keep them in your pockets," he advised.

The professor entered and stood behind the long desk. His eyes swept the lecture hall. "Today we will review the exam," he said.

Someone yelled "Now!" and everyone stood up and began throwing stones at the professor.

"No!" he screamed, dodging back and forth behind the desk. "It was *fair*, it was *fair* . . ." A three inch stone struck him on the temple and he fell. Eliot had not thrown any stones and some of the other students were beginning to look at him with suspicion. He rose hurriedly and flung all seven stones at the recumbent professor. Three or four of the larger boys left their seats, ran to the front of the room, and stood over the man, flinging the last of their stones down at him.

After it was over, an argument developed as to whether the class should wait out the hour or leave directly. A vote was taken and it was decided to leave. Eliot, confused, walked over to Willard Straight Hall and sat down in the Browsing Library.

Opposite him, at the only table in the room, was The Girl. He had never been able to speak to her or engage her in a game of eyes and feet. He had, in fact, almost despaired of ever striking an acquaintance with her; nevertheless he knew he would not be able to study while she was there.

He had not caught her eye even once when the lighting fixtures shook and the books rattled on the shelves. The vibration ceased and then started again almost immediately. Students began gathering up their books and walking rapidly out of the building. Eliot followed suit as the shaking and rumbling increased. As he reached the street the building collapsed into a heap of stone fragments and smoke. The screams of those who had not gotten out in time rose over the noise of the still-settling rubble.

"Not building them like they used to," Eliot remarked to a fellow-survivor. He was favored with a look he had thought people reserved for the

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mad or the degenerate. The boy turned and walked as fast as he could without running from Eliot.

No one seemed very concerned about the collapse of the Straight. The cars driving down the street out front were moving slowly, but only because someone had been run over and the passage of subsequent cars over his remains had made the road slippery.

Eliot made his way to Olin Library and found a seat in the smoking room. The Girl was in the next seat, reading a book with a Latin title. Eliot had hardly sat down when the familiar rumbling began. "Come on," he said to The Girl. They ran out. This time they escaped by more than a minute.

"Something is wrong," said The Girl.

"Yes," Eliot agreed. "No one seems to care about the buildings falling."

A tall, lighthaired boy greeted The Girl, "Hi, Jeannie."

"Hi, Dave." Dave leaned over and pinched the tip of her breast. She slapped him. He gave her the same look Eliot had received after leaving the collapsing Straight. "What's the matter with *you*?" he said and hurried away.

"Very wrong," she said to Eliot.

"I have a feeling that things are wrong in general. I can't remember when I first thought it, though."

"I know what you mean. I can't remember when it started, either. I can't even put my finger on just what's wrong."

Eliot looked at his watch. "Listen, I've got to go to a House meeting now," he said. "Can you meet me here, in front of the tower, right after dinner?"

"Yes," she said. She started away.

"By the way," he shouted after her. "What's your name?"

She turned and answered, "Jeanie, Jeanie Vornhausern. What's yours?"

"Eliot Bien," he said. "Bye, Jeanie."

He started down the hill. By the time he reached the Gamma Alpha house the meeting had already started. A series of secret raps admitted him to the chapter room. He was surprised to see that the little Erquhardt boy was present. The kid lived two houses away from the fraternity and he often hung around, looking at the magazines and chasing fly balls the brothers hit. He was standing between two brothers who held his arms.

". . . has anyone seen the obsidian dagger?" the Exalted Master was asking.

"I think the pledges got it when they raided the chapter room," offered the Vice-Exalted Master.

"Someone get a knife from the kitchen then." The Sergeant-at-Arms went out. The best he could find was a bread knife with a serrated edge.

"Okay," said the Exalted Master when he was handed the knife. The two brothers who were holding the boy brought him forward and bent him into a kneeling position before the altar. "Before the completion of this most sacred and venerable of Gamma Alpha rituals I must question you sponsers on the qualifications of the boy."

"So be the will of the Exalted Master and the Word of Gamma Alpha," mumbled the two brothers, almost in unison.

"(One) is he chaste?"

"As he can face the Book, is he pure." They pushed his face into the Bible which lay on the alter, opened to Romans. His nose touched 12.2.

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"(Two) is he a nigger, a kike, a chink, a snapper, a wop, a dago, a polack, a spick, a mick, a frog, a wog, a bohunk, a greaser, a kraut, or a member of any other racial, religious, or ethnic minority?"

"Beats me."

"Damn, you're not supposed to say that," complained the Master. "Here, read it from the ritual book."

"Oh . . . 'It is obvious that he is none of these, but a *gentleman* in the true Gamma Alpha tradition.' "

"(Three) has anyone in his family in the last ten generations done manual labor?"

"Look upon his hands, they are not sullied. The sins of the father are vested on the sons."

"I am glad to report, then, that all is well, and we may procede." The brothers bent the boy's head down to the Bible again.

"Then by the Word of Gamma Alpha, God, and The Founder, I accept you," he said, raising the knife and stabbing the boy in the back of the neck. The Vice-Exalted Master managed to fill a sliver plated cup before the blood stopped spurting.

The cup was passed around and all the brothers took a ceremonial sip except Eliot who faked it. The Exalted Master, closed the meeting and announced that dinner was ready. Eliot was not hungry so he went up the hill to wait for Jeanie.

She was there when he reached what were now the ruins of the tower. "Hello," she said. "I couldn't eat tonight; they had grasshoppers." She started to sob. "I'm so frightened. I don't know what's happening. Nobody seems to care, or even notice." Eliot put his arms around her.

"Don't worry. At least there are two of us. I'll take care of you, only . . ."

"Only?" she looked up from her crying.

"Somehow, I think that I'm responsible for the whole mess, for everything being *wrong*. I just can't remember how or why, though."

"No," she assured him. "You couldn't be." She leaned up and kissed him. "I love you." A man in work clothes approached them.

"Could you two please move?" he asked. "We're cleaning up."

"Let's go," said Eliot. "We'll go to my apartment."

As they walked they saw many workmen in grey clothes bustling through the dusk. They were clearing away the debris of the fallen buildings. They lifted and shoveled stones, shards of glass, and bodies into a line of open trucks. As each truck was filled it pulled away and the one behind it pulled up to the head of the line.

The site of the Straight had already been cleared and the workmen had started to erect a new building.

In his apartment they embraced. "I love you," he said. They undressed and when they were naked they embraced again.

"At least there's this," she said. "To hold on to. Come on." She hugged him tighter. They lay down on his wide bed, back to back, knees drawn up to chins, arms clasped around knees. They lay like that the whole night. For a time Eliot had a feeling that something was wrong, but it soon went away.

—Laurence Littenberg

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THE SHAPE CHANGER

(Second of Two Parts)

Lafayette O'Leary had a problem—a very simple problem, if he could only convince someone of it. He wasn't himself, at all . . .

KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by MICHAEL KALUTA

SYNOPSIS

Sir Lafayette O'Leary is in trouble—bad trouble. It started with a note from the Red Bull to meet him down at the Axe and Dragon. There the supposedly reformed crook showed O'Leary a Mark III Focal Referent—a small gadget that was the property of Central Probability's laboratory. The Red Bull's story was that he'd found it in a cave—where there was lots more loot. He left O'Leary alone with the device for a moment and in that moment Lafayette succumbed to curiosity, pushed a button, and found his universe turning itself inside out.

The next moment he was not Lafayette O'Leary—he was Zorro, a minor thief of the Wayfairer Tribe. But he was still seated at a table in the Axe and Dragon, still thinking O'Leary-ish thoughts.

That's where his trouble began. No one recognized him for Lafayette O'Leary. In fact, his old friend, Shorty, arrested him for loitering and he would've been thrown in the dungeon if some of Zorro's fellow Wayfairers hadn't rescued him.

Frying pan to fire: as Zorro he was pledged to marry Gizelle, and she was not in a mood to hear his excuses—such as the fact that, as O'Leary, he was already happily married to Daphne.

Escaping over a cliff, he finds a hidden cave—Artesia seems riddled with hidden caves—in which is sitting a Mark XXIV Stasis Pod. He triggers it and it opens, allowing a bearded old man to climb out of it. The man's face is so fierce that O'Leary flees the cave and makes his exit into thin air.

He awakes to find himself in rather battered condition, and under the care of a silver-haired little man named Lom. Lom serves him breakfast of Bavarian ham, eggs Benedict, oatmeal bread with unsalted Danish butter and a spot of lime marmalade; and New Orleans style coffee. And this in a grass hut on an unscalable mesa. Perplexed, O'Leary tries to escape, and finds probability shifting around him.

In the next moment he is Tazlo Haz, a winged man flying across the sky.

Inexperienced in the art of flying, he

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falls into a dive and crashes—not to earth, but into one of a system of giant trees. There he finds a complex society of winged people, including Sisli Pim, Tazlo's intended bride.

New problems: the winged people can not only fly, they also "merge" through solid objects and have an instinctive awareness of their spacial relationships with each other. O'Leary is taken to Sisli's "nest," and finds that it is located in the center of a giant tree—with no doors, windows, or other openings to the outside. If he can learn to "merge" he will be trapped permanently within the "nest."

And this, he learns, is what Wizner Hiz, the patriarch of the winged people, expects. As far as Wizner Hiz is concerned, Tazlo has been possessed by a "Mind-Gobbler," and all too soon his feathers will molt, his wings atrophy, and he will sprout hair and become hideous. O'Leary finds himself put to the test: if he can escape the "nest," he will have proved himself to be Tazlo. If he cannot, he will be proven a Mind-Gobbler. Sisli tries to help him, but in the end it is up to him.

It is becoming apparent to O'Leary that he really is a Mind-Gobbler—that there was a real Tazlo Hiz, whose mind he has displaced. Despite the fact that he himself has no control over the phenomenon, he has been twice shunted into bodies not his own—each time with potentially disasterous consequences: Yet, something of the body's true identity remains, on the instinctual level. And if he can only just find and attune himself to Tazlo's instinctive ability to "merge" . . .

He succeeds, and enjoys a brief

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period of grace among the winged people. But all too soon his feathers begin to molt, and this time he knows he cannot pass the test.

With almost sadistic pleasure, Wizner Hiz, the self-appointed guardian of his people against the dreaded Mind-Gobblers, organizes a "Sing-Out" which will cast O'Leary free from Tazlo's body. The chant begins simply, but builds and develops into waves of sound which wax and wane, rolling at O'Leary from all sides, until he finds himself fading out into bodiless darkness . . .

Floating in Limbo, O'Leary is startled by snatches of thoughts, and, above them, someone asking him for his "Snag Number." Having no "Snag Number," he has nothing to tell his would-be rescuer until another man comes floating by. He reaches out to embrace the man and finds himself instead inside *him. Once again he has taken possession of a body—and this one is Probability Agent Raunchini. He reads the Snag Number on the plate attached to his wrist, and from somewhere he is* snagged—

—Right into Probability Central. The very place he wanted to reach!

The only problem now *is that once again he is in another identity—and faced with the implacable bureaucracy of Probability Central's administration. He tries to explain his mission—and Artesia's growing emergency—to an administrator named Belarius, but the stumbling block is his identity: he checks out as Raunchini, and he cannot, therefore, be O'Leary. What's more, there is, Belarius says, no Mark III Focal Referent. The Mark II weighs tons, and a Mark III has not yet been developed.*

Then comes the topper. Another "O'Leary" has joined Central as a new recruit, and is here at Central Casting now. Belarius sends for the recruit—

And in comes Daphne!

CHAPTER SEVEN

FOR A MOMENT there was total silence. Belarius looked from Lafayette to the girl and back again. She stared at Lafayette; he grinned a vast and foolish grin and started toward her.

"How in the world did you get here, girl? When they told me they had an O'Leary here, it never occurred to me it might be—"

"How do you know my name?" Daphne cut in with surprising sharpness. She spun to face Belarius. "Who is this man? Does he know anything about Lafayette?"

"Do I know anything about Lafayette?" O'Leary cried. "Daphne, I guess the wings fooled you. Don't you know me?"

"I never saw you before in my life! What have you done to my husband?"

"I haven't done anything to your husband! I *am* your husband!"

"Stay away from me!" She took refuge behind a large cop, who put a protective arm around her shoulders.

"Get your greasy paws off her, you flatfoot!" Lafayette yelled.

"One moment!" Belarius thundered. "You, Raunchini! Stand where you are! You, Recruit O'Leary:

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for the record: do you know this Agent?"

"I never saw him before in my life!"

"Why waste time and breath, Raunchini?" Belarius grated. "You heard O'Leary's description: six feet, one seventy, blue eyes. You're five-five, two-ten, black eyes, swarthy complected."

"I know I'm—huh?" O'Leary paused, looked over his left shoulder, then his right. "The wings!" he blurted. "They're gone!" He looked down at himself, saw a barrel chest, generous paunch, bandy legs, pudgy-fingered hands with a dense growth of black hair on their backs. He stepped to one of the framed photos, stared at his face reflected in the glass. It was round, olive-skinned, with a flat nose and a wide mouth crowded with crooked teeth.

"Ye gods—it's happened again!" he groaned. "No wonder you thought I was crazy, talking about my wings!"

"May I go now?" Recruit O'Leary requested.

"Daphne!" Lafayette yelled. "Surely *you* know me, no matter what I look like!"

Daphne looked puzzled.

"There was this note," Lafayette went on in tones of desperation. "It was from the Red Bull; he wanted me to meet him at the A & D Tavern. I went down there, and he had this gimmick—something that Goruble had stashed in a cave. Anyway, I was just looking at it, and my finger slipped, and *whap!* I turned into somebody else!"

"Is he . . . is he . . .?" Daphne looked questioningly at Belarius, circling a shell-like ear with a slim forefinger.

"No, I'm not nuts! I tried to get back to the palace to report what I'd discovered, and the City Guard grabbed me! And before I could explain matters, Luppo and a mob of Wayfarers butted in and carted me off to their camp, but Gizelle helped me get away, and—"

"Gizelle?" Daphne pounced with unerring feminine instinct.

"Yes, uh, a fine girl, you'll love her. Anyway, she took me to her wagon, and—"

"Hmmph!" Daphne sniffed, turning away. "I'm really not interested in this person's *amours*, whoever he is!"

"It wasn't like that! It was purely Platonic."

"That's enough, Raunchini!" Belarius bellowed. "O'Leary, you can go. Men, take Raunchini down to Trog Twelve and prep him for brain-scrape!"

"What's . . . what's brain-scrape?" Daphne paused at the door, casting a hesitant look at Lafayette.

"A technique for getting at the truth," Belarius growled. "Something like peeling a grape."

"Will it . . . hurt him?"

"Eh? Well, it will more or less spoil him for future use. Leaves the subject a babbling idiot in stubborn cases. But don't concern yourself, O'Leary; he'll receive his full pension, never fear."

"Daphne!" Lafayette called after her. "If you have any influence with this bunch of maniacs, tell them to listen to me!" Belarius gestured; two men stepped forward, seized Lafayette's arms, helped him toward

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the door.

"Tough luck, pal," one of the cops said. "I'd act nuts too, if I thought it'd get me next to a dish like that."

"I'll say," another of the escort agreed. "Brother, you don't see it stacked up like that every day—"

"That's enough out of you, Buster!" Lafayette roared, and delivered a solid kick to the shin of the luckless girl-watcher. As the man stumbled back with a yell, Lafayette jerked free, ducked under a grab, and leaped for the door. Belarius rounded his desk in time to receive a straight-arm to the mouth. O'Leary side-stepped a tackle, plunged into the corridor.

"Daphne!" O'Leary shouted as she turned and stared, wide-eyed. "If I never see you again—remember I love you! And don't forget to feed Dinny!"

"Hey—grab him!" One of the waiting stretcher-bearers yelled. Lafayette ducked aside from his reach, thrust out a foot, sending the fellow sprawling. Two more men erupted from the room. More men were advancing at a run, closing in from both directions.

"The stretcher!" Daphne cried suddenly. "Use the stretcher!"

Lafayette ducked a wild swing, sprang aboard the slab hovering a foot above the carpet, jabbed the red button marked LIFT. The cot shot ceilingward, slammed him hard against the flowered wallpaper. He groped, pushed a stud at random. The stretcher shot backward, raking Lafayette across a rank of fluorescent lights. He fumbled again, dropped the cot to head height and shot forward in time to clip an on-coming security man full in the mouth, sending him bounding back against his partner. Full tilt, the cot rushed along the passage; Lafayette closed his eyes and hung on as it hurtled toward the intersection; at the last possible instant it banked, whipped around the turn, and shot at high speed through a pair of double doors—fortunately open.

The runaway steed made three swift circuits of the large green-walled room before Lafayette found a control that brought it to a shuddering halt, sending him tumbling to the rug. He rolled to hands and knees, saw that he was in the room where he had first arrived. The green-haired woman behind the desk was stabbing hysterically at her console, yelping for help.

"Here, I'll help you," Lafayette said. He scrambled up, jumped to the desk, and pushed two palmfuls of buttons, jabbed half a dozen of the keys, flipped an entire rank of switches. A siren sounded; the lights brightened and dimmed. From wall apertures, a pale pink gas began hissing into the room. The receptionist screeched.

"Don't worry, I'm not violent," Lafayette yelled. "All I want is out! Which way?"

"Don't come near me, you maniac!"

Lafayette dashed to the section of wall through which he had entered, began feeling over it frantically as alarm horns hooted behind him. Abruptly, a panel rotated open on a dimly glowing chamber. Lafayette stepped through; the panel slammed behind him. A green light glowed on the opposite wall. There was a momentary sensation as if his brain had

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come loose from its moorings and was whirling at high speed inside his skull. Then darkness exploded around him.

2

HE DRIFTED among luminous flotsam and jetsam, straining every sense . . .

. . . *tinky-tinky-tinky* . . .

. . . *you think you're the only bird in town with a pair o' them* . . .?

. . . *where are you? Come in, dear boy, if you hear me. Come in, come in* . . .

A vast, softly glowing construction of puce and magenta noodles swept grandly past, rotating slowly; a swarm of luminous blue-green BB shot veered close, passed him by; something vast and insubstantial as glowing smoke swelled before him, swirled around him with a crackle of static, was gone. A jittering assemblage of red-hot wires came tumbling from dark distances, swerved to intercept him. He back-pedalled, making frantic swimming motions, but it closed on him, was all about him, clinging, penetrating.

It was as though a hundred and seventy pounds of warm wax were being injected into his skin, painlessly squeezing him out through the pores.

Aha! Got you, you bodynapper!" a silent voice yelled in both ears at once.

"Hey—wait!" O'Leary shouted. "Can't we discuss this?"

Wait, nothing! Out! Out!

For a moment O'Leary saw a vengeful face—the same face he had seen in the glass in Belarius' office—glaring at him. Then he was sliding away into emptiness.

"Wait! Help! I have to get word to Nicodaeus!"

"*Leave me drifting in Limbo will you* . . ." the voice came back faintly.

"Raunchini! Don't leave me here! I've got to get back . . ."

"*How* . . ." the voice came faintly, receding, "*do you know my name* . . .?" The voice was gone. Lafayette shouted—or not shouted, he realized; *transmitted*, in some way he would figure out later, after he was safe back home. But there was no answer; only faint, ghostly voices all around:

. . . *told him no, but you know how men are* . . .

. . . *oopy-toopy-foopy-foom* . . .

Nine . . . *eight* . . . *seven* . . .

DEAR BOY! IS IT REALLY YOU? I'D ABOUT GIVEN UP HOPE!

"Help!" Lafayette yelled. He was rotating end-over-end now—or was it the other way around? He could feel his sense of identity draining away like oil from a broken pot; his thoughts were growing weaker, vaguer, the voices fainter . . .

Hold on, lad . . . *just a few seconds longer* . . . *don't give up the ship* . . .

Something as intangible as smoke brushed over him; A vague fog-shape loomed, enveloped him like a shadowy fist. A sense of pressure, a burst of light—then darkness . . .

3

HE WAS LYING on a hard, lumpy surface, itching furiously. He made a move to scratch, and discovered that both knees were bandaged, as well as both elbows and his chin.

He struggled to a sitting position. In the faint moonlight that filtered down

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through the leaves overhead, he saw that he was neatly enclosed in a cage made of lashed poles. He had been lying, he saw, on an ancient mattress with a stained striped ticking; there was a bowl of water beside him, and what appeared to be gnawed crusts of bread. He sniffed; the odors hanging in the air—of unwashed laundry, goat cheese, and wood-smoke—were somehow familiar. His legs and arms ached, his back ached, his neck ached.

"I must be black and blue all over," he grunted. "Where am I? What's happened to me?"

There was a soft sound of footsteps; a familiar figure approached.

"Gizelle!" O'Leary's voice broke with relief. "Am I glad to see you! Get me out of here!"

The girl stood with hands on hips, looking down at him with an unreadable expression. "Zorro?" she said doubtfully.

O'Leary groaned. "I know, I look like a fellow named Raunchini. But it's really me—not really Zorro, but the fellow you thought was Zorro—only I was actually Lafayette O'Leary, of course. But I'll explain all that later."

"You don't theenk you're a beeg bird anymore? You don't try to jump off cleefs, flapping your arms?"

"What? I didn't jump off the cliff, I fell—and—"

Gizelle smiled; she turned, whistled shrilly. Voices responded. A moment later Luppo's hulking figure appeared. He stared at O'Leary with an expression like a Doberman awaiting the kill order.

"Why deed you wheestle?" he grunted. "Ees he . . .?"

"He says he ees heemself—Zorro!"

"Of course I'm myself—in a manner of speaking," Lafayette snapped. "But—oh, well, never mind. You wouldn't understand. Just let me out of here, pronto!"

"Uh-huh—that's heem," Luppo said.

"Good! Een that case—when the sun rises—we can proceed!" Gizelle cried ecstatically.

"Oh, look here, Gizelle—you're not going to start that wedding business all over again?" Lafayette protested.

Luppo looked at him, a gold tooth shining in his crooked grin. "Not quite," he said. "Would you believe . . . the Death of the Thousand Hooks?"

4

"EET WEEL BE very exciting, Zorito," Gizelle informed Lafayette, leaning close to his cage to hiss the words in his face. "First weel be the feexing of the hooks. Een the old days, there was just one beeg hook, you know—but naturally we've been making progress. Now we use leetle beety feesh hooks—hundreds and hundreds of theem. We steeck theem een—slowly—all over you. Then we tie a streeng to each one, and leeft you up eento the air weeth theem—"

"Gizelle—spare me the details!" O'Leary groaned. "If I'm Zorro, I already know all this—and if I'm not, I'm innocent, and you ought to free me. You ought to free me anyway; what's a nice girl like you doing mixed up in a dirty business like this, anyway?"

"Free you? A feelthy peeg who takes

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advantage of a poor girl who ees fool enough to love heem?"

"I've told you—I'm not myself! I mean I'm not really Zorro! I mean—I *am* Zorro—physically—but actually I'm Lafayette O'Leary! I'm just occupying Zorro's body for the moment! Under the circumstances it wouldn't be ethical for me to marry you. Can't you see that?"

"First you made me streep; theen you sneaked out like a policeman een the night, and locked me een my own budoir! A meellion feesh hooks could not repay me for the pangs I have suffered for you, you . . . sheep een wolves clothing!"

"Why didn't you do the job while I was out of my mind? Then I wouldn't have known anything about it."

"What? Mistreat a holy man, affleected of Dumballa? You theenk we are barbarians?"

"Yeah—it would have been pretty tough on Tazlo Haz. The poor boob wouldn't have had a clue what was going on."

"Tazlo Haz—that's what you kept screeching wheen you were trying to fly," Gizelle said. "What does eet mean?"

"It's my name. I mean it was Zorro's name—or the name of the ego that was shifted into Zorro's body when I shifted into his. He's a birdman—with wings, you know." Lafayette fingered his skinned knees gingerly. "I guess it was as hard for him to realize his wings were gone as it was for me to walk through walls."

"Zorito—you are a beeg liar—for theese I geeve you credit," Gizelle said. "But eet's not enough. Now I'm going to get a leetle beauty sleep; I want to look my best for you tomorrow—while you're hanging from the hooks." She turned and hurried away; O'Leary wasn't sure whether there had been a break in her voice on the last words or not.

5

LAFAYETTE slumped in the corner of the cage, his aching head resting on his bandaged knees.

"I must be getting old," he thought drearily. "I used to be able to land on my feet—but now I just stumble from one disaster to the next. If I could just explain to somebody, just once, what's actually going on—but somehow, nobody will listen. Everybody seems to hear what they want to hear—or what they expect to hear."

He shifted position. The moon was low in the sky now. It would be daylight in another couple of hours. He might last for a few more hours after that, but by lunchtime it would be all over—if he was lucky. The trestle tables set up under the trees would be laden with roast turkeys and hams and nine-layer chocolate cakes, and pitchers of foaming ale; the holiday crowd would feast merrily, with his dangling body as the principle object of merriment. And back in Artesia City, Daphne would be snuggling up with . . .

"Oh, no she's not," he reminded himself. "That's one consolation anyway. She's in Central, being trained as a rookie agent."

Yeah—but why?

"Well—maybe she got worried and dialled Central, reported that I was

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missing—"

Uh-uh. There was nothing in the record about that. Belarius checked.

"Maybe—" Lafayette felt cold fingers clutch at his chest. "Maybe that wasn't really Daphne! Maybe somebody's stolen *her* body, too!"

Guesswork! That won't get you anywhere. Stick to the point!

"Great! What *is* the point?"

The point is you've got about two hours to live unless you do something fast!

"But what?" he groaned between gritted teeth. "So far I've been a leaf in the storm, tossed this way and that by events that have been running wild, out of control. I've got to take over and start running things *my* way for a change. And the first item is to get out of here . . ."

He prowled the cage for the fiftieth time, inspecting every joint—and found them all as securely lashed with rawhide as the last time. He checked each stout rail; the smallest was as big as his arm at the elbow, with room between them barely sufficient to pass a water cup. He tried again to rock the cage, on the chance that tipping it would open a seam; it was like rocking a bank vault.

"All right, without a knife direct measures are out. What about more sophisticated techniques? Like focussing the Psychical Energies, for example . . ."

O'Leary closed his eyes, marshalled his thoughts.

It's worked before. It's how you got to Artesia in the first place, remember? And how you met Daphne. Remember how you wished for a bath tub, and got one—complete with occupant? She certainly looked charming, wearing nothing but soapsuds and a pretty smile. And later, in the pink and silver gown, facing the duchess . . . and later yet, snuggling up in the dark . . .

"But this isn't getting me out of this cage," he reminded himself sternly. "Think about the time you produced a Coke machine when you were dying of thirst in the desert, on your way to Lod's stronghold. Or about conjuring up Dinny, when I needed a ride. I got a dinosaur instead of a horse, true, but as it turned out, that was a lucky break . . ."

Stop reminiscing! he commanded himself. *You were going to focus your Psychical Energies, remember?*

"I can't," he muttered. "Central put an end to all that with their blasted Suppressor. Let's face it, I'm stuck."

That's what you thought when you were in Melange, too—but you were wrong!

"Sure—but that was a special case. I was in another Locus, the rules were changed . . ."

Try! This is no time to give up!

"Well . . ." Lafayette closed his eyes, pictured a sharp-bladed pocket knife lying in the corner of the cage. *Under some litter,* he specified, *in a spot where I wouldn't have seen it. I haven't actually scraped around over there; I don't KNOW there isn't a knife . . . So BE there, knife! A nice little Barlow with a bone handle . . .*

If there was a small quiver in the even flow of entropy, he failed to detect it.

"But that doesn't mean it didn't work," he said bravely. "Take a look . . ." He went to the corner in question, scraped away the drifted

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leaves and bird droppings and straw, exposing bare planks.

"No knife," he mumbled. "It figures. My luck's run out. I didn't have a chance from the beginning. I can see that now."

Sure. But why? Maybe if you could figure out why, you'd have a chance of fighting back.

"Why? How do I know? Because somebody wanted me out of the way, I suppose."

Why not just knock you in the head, in that case? Why all this business of turning you into Zorro?

"Maybe . . . maybe that was just a side effect. If it wasn't just you that was turned into Zorro; if Zorro was also turned into *you*—and it seems like a logical assumption—if you can call any part of this insanity logical . . ."

Then—the whole idea might have been to get Zorro into my body—and I was just dumped into his to get me out of the way.

"It's a possibility."

But why? What would that accomplish?

"For one thing—assuming Zorro's the culprit—it would put him in the palace right now, occupying your place, using your clothes, your toothbrush, your bed—"

Let's drop that line of thought for the moment! OK, so Zorro found a way to steal bodies. He conned the Red Bull into handing me the Mark III Shape Changer, and I was boob enough to push the button. Then what? It still doesn't explain things like the Stasis Pod, and the old geezer in blue robes.

"Ye Gods!" O'Leary blurted. "That's who the photo was, back in Belarius' office! The old man in the tank—but without the beard!"

6

NOW WE'RE GETTING somewhere, Lafayette assured himself. *We've established a connection between Central and Artesia, that Central—or at least Belarius—doesn't seem to know anything about.*

"Right—and if you recall, he got a bit paranoid as soon as he caught you staring at the photo of . . . what did he call him? Jorlemagne. Wanted you to rat on him, spill the beans—implying you were in it with him—whatever 'it' is."

But that doesn't explain why this Jorlemagne was lying around in a cave like Sleeping Beauty in an electronic bunk-bed making strange noises at anybody who disturbs him.

"Wait a minute; let's see what we've got: Back at Central, there's been some skulduggery. Belarius is upset about something done by Jorlemagne, who's dropped out of sight. This may or may not tie in with the Focal Referent, which Belarius may not know anything about, probably the latter, since he's under the impression it weighs umpteen tons . . ."

Wait a minute. It seems I remember him correcting me when I called it a Mark III. He insisted it was a Mark II. So . . .

"So—maybe what you had was a new model, miniaturized. But—why wouldn't Belarius know that? After all, he's Chief of Research, and the Focal Referent was his baby."

I don't know. But at the same time he's having trouble with this Jorlemagne absconding—presumably with a newer model FR than even

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Belarius knows about—funny things started happening in Artesia. And Artesia is where Jorlemagne is. So—

"So all I have to do is get to a phone and dial my special number, and tell them where to pick up their boy!"

Fine—except you'll still be Zorro—and somebody else with your face will be filling in for you at home!

"Maybe Central can fix that, too."

"I can't wait that long! I have to get back and see what's going on! There's got to be a reason for that sneaking phony to have stolen my body! I want to know what it is!"

Meanwhile—how do you get out of this cage?

"Yeah—there is that," O'Leary muttered. "I can't cut my way out—and I can't wish myself out. It looks like the end of the trail. Damn! And just when I was beginning to see a little light."

There's still a lot of loose ends. What about Lom—the kindly old gent who picked you up and fed you—and then picked your pocket?

"Yeah—what about him? Bavarian ham, yet. And Danish butter. Nobody in Artesia ever heard of Denmark or Bavaria. Or New Orleans, either!" O'Leary smacked his fist into his palm. "It's obvious! Lom's a Central agent, too."

And when he found the Focal Referent on you—he naturally assumed you were the thief—or that you were in it with Jorlemagne—

"So he took steps to get rid of you. Dumped you in Thallathlone."

Uh-huh. But I got away—by a fluke—and wound up back here. Nice work, O'Leary. Which is better—a nice cool cell in Thallathlone, or the Death of the Thousand Hooks?

"In another few hours it won't matter, one way or another," O'Leary sighed. "Well, I've had a nice run, while it lasted, but it had to end. I parlayed it from a dull job in a foundry to six years of high living in a palace; I guess I should be satisfied with that. Even if I'd known how it would end, I wouldn't want to change it. Except maybe this last part. It seems like a dirty way to go. This is one time the miracle isn't going to happen. But since there's no hope the least I can do is pull myself together and die like a man."

The moon had set; through the inky black, Lafayette could see nothing except the glow of the guard fire a hundred yards away, and a single candle in a wagon window.

Something passed between Lafayette and the light. Stealthy footsteps sounded from the darkness, coming toward him.

"Hey," he protested, discovering a sudden obstruction in his throat. "It's not time yet."

"Hssst!" Someone was at the bars—a small, silvery-haired figure.

"Lom!"

"Quite right, my boy. Sorry I took so long." There was a rasp of steel against hard leather; a knifeblade threw back a glint from the distant fire. Lashings parted; bars were pulled aside. Lafayette crawled through, ignoring the pain in his scraped knees.

"Let's be off," Lom whispered. "You and I have things to discuss my lad."

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE STARS WERE fading in the first gray paling of the dawn. Lafayette huddled, shivering, beside the tiny fire Lom had built under a sheltering rock ledge.

"Sorry there's no coffee this time," the old gentleman said. "You look as though you need it, indeed."

"New Orleans style?" O'Leary queried.

"Umm. Rather good, wasn't it? Never fear, we'll soon be back at my digs, and—"

"They don't have New Orleans coffee in Artesia, Lom—or German ham, either."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand . . ." Lom looked genuinely puzzled.

"New Orleans is in Locus Alpha Nine-three. So is Bavaria—and Denmark."

Lom shook his head. "Dear lad, I merely read what it said on the labels. I don't even know what an old Orleans is, to say nothing of a New one."

"Where did you get the stuff, Lom? There's no handy supermarket around the corner from that peak of yours."

There was a pause.

"Oh, dear." Lom said.

"Well?"

"I . . . I should have known it was wrong. But after all—there seemed to be no owner. There it was, piled in the cave—and—and I—well, I appropriated it. My only defense is . . . I was hungry."

"You *found* it?"

"Please believe me. It would be dreadful if you got the wrong impression."

"Yes—wouldn't it . . ."

"Are you hinting at something?"

"Not hinting, Lom. I want to know where you fit into all this."

"You're being frightfully obscure, my boy—"

"I'm not your boy—in spite of your rescuing me. Come clean, Lom: what do you want from me?"

"I? Why, nothing, nothing at all. I felt responsible for you, in a way, and did my best to help you—"

"How did you find me?" Lafayette cut in.

"Ah—as to that, I employed a simple device called a Homer. It makes bipping sounds, you see, and—"

"More electronic gadgets, eh? Where'd you get it?"

"Concealed in a small grotto."

"Grotto?"

"Cave. I hope I didn't do wrong by using it to save you from a horrible death . . .?"

"Another lucky find, eh? That's your answer to everything. Well, I suppose it's possible. Every cave in Artesia seems to be stuffed full of loot. But that still doesn't explain how you carried me from wherever I landed up to that eagle's nest. A mountain goat couldn't have climbed those cliffs, even without me on his back."

"Climb . . .? Oh, I see what you were thinking! No, no, I should have explained. You see—there's a stairway. An escalator, as a matter of fact. No trick at all, just had to drag you a few feet and push the button." Lom beamed.

"Oh, that clears everything up,"

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Lafayette said. "Swell. You didn't climb, you used the escalator. How stupid of me not to have figured that one out."

"You . . . you sound dubious."

"Who are you, Lom!" O'Leary demanded. "Where do you come from? Why did you cut me out of that cage?"

Lom drew a breath, hesitated, let it out in a sigh. "I," he said in a dismal tone, "am a failure." He looked across the flickering fire at Lafayette. "Once, I occupied a . . . a position of considerable trust. Then . . . things went badly for me. There was a robbery, so arranged as to make it appear that I—that I was the thief. I escaped barely ahead of the authorities."

"And?"

"I . . . made my way here. Foraging, I stumbled on the, er, supplies of which you know; I found the route to my isolated hideaway. Then—*you* dropped from the skies. I naturally did what I could for you."

"Then?"

"Then you disappeared. Poof! I searched for you—and at last I found you, as you know. And here we are."

"You left out one small item. What did you do with the Mark III?"

"Mark who?"

"Maybe you didn't make off with the till, back where you came from," O'Leary said. "But there was a gadget concealed in a secret pocket of my coat. You took it while I was unconscious. I want it back."

Lom was shaking his head emphatically. "You wrong me, my boy—"

"Just call me O'Leary."

"Is that your name?" Lom asked quickly.

"Certainly—"

"Then why did you tell the young woman—the one who seemed to dislike you so—that it was Zorro?"

"Because it is. I mean, she knows me as Zorro—"

"But that's not your real name? Curious that you have the letter Z embroidered on your shirt pocket—and on your handkerchief—and your socks."

"I'm in disguise," Lafayette said. "Don't try to change the subject. Where's the Mark III?"

"Tell me about it," Lom suggested.

"I'll tell you this much," Lafayette snapped. "It's the most dangerous object in the country! I don't know why you wanted it; maybe you thought you could pawn it; but—"

"Mr. O'Leary—I took nothing from your person, while you were asleep or any other time!"

"Don't stall, Lom! I want it back!"

"You may search me if you wish; you're considerably larger and stronger than I. I can't stop you."

"What good would that do? You could have hidden it."

"Indeed? And why, if I had robbed you, would I have returned to preserve you from what, it appeared, would have been a peculiarly unpleasant fate?"

"Maybe you needed me to show you how to operate it."

"I see. Without letting on I had it, I suppose."

"Well, blast it," O'Leary snarled, "if you didn't take it, where is it?"

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"Possibly," Lom said thoughtfully, "it dropped from your pocket when you fell . . ."

There was a momentary silence, while Lafayette stared across the fire at the small, indignant figure, who returned the look defiantly.

"All right," O'Leary sighed. "I can't prove you took it. I guess I ought to apologize. And to thank you for getting me out of that cage."

"Perhaps," Lom said, "if you told me a bit more about the missing item?"

"Forget it, Lom. The less anybody knows about it, the better."

"This Mark III; was it your property? Or were you keeping it for someone else?"

"Don't pry, Lom! Tell me: in your explorations, did you come across a cave with, ah, with anything, oh, like a sort of box in it?"

"Since you won't answer my questions, O'Leary, why should I answer yours?"

"Because I need to get to the bottom of this, that's why! There's a plot afoot, Lom! Bigger than anything you could imagine! And I'm mixed up in it! And I want out!"

"Oh? In that case, why not tell me all you know—"

"Never mind." O'Leary got painfully to his feet. "I've got to get going, Lom. Time's a-wasting. I have to make contact with . . ." He broke off. "With some friends of mine," he finished.

"Suppose I go with you," Lom suggested, jumping up.

"Out of the question," Lafayette said. "I don't mean to be rude, but I can't afford to be slowed down. Beside which it might be dangerous."

"I don't mind. And I'll do my best to keep to the pace."

"Look, Lom, you're far better off right here. You have your hut, and you can live on leaves and berries and Bavarian ham, in peace and quiet—"

"I still have hopes," Lom cut in, "of clearing my name. Possibly these friends you mentioned could help me."

"King Shosto and his boys will be combing the woods for me. If they catch you in my company they'll probably allocate five hundred of those hooks to you."

"I doubt it, lad. I know the trails through these hills quite well. In fact, without me to guide you, I doubt if you'll ever reach the city."

"Well—come on then. I can't stop you. But don't expect me to wait for you." He turned away.

"Wait!" Lom said sharply. "Not that way, Mr. O'Leary." He stepped forward and parted the bushes to reveal a narrow path leading down the rocky slope. "Shall we go?"

2

TWICE in the hour before sunrise, O'Leary and Lom were forced to take refuge in deep shrubbery while a party of Wayfarers thrashed their way through the underbrush close at hand. From their conversation it was apparent that there would be plenty of hooks to go around when the owner of the footprints near the broached cage was apprehended along with the escaped prisoner.

"Tsk. Such an uncharitable attitude," Lom commented as they

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emerged from their last concealment.

"Just wait until I get my hands on this Zorro character," Lafayette said. "He's the one at the bottom of this—"

"I thought *you* were Zorro?" Lom said sharply.

"Not really. I just look like him. I mean—well, never mind. It's too complicated."

He turned to see Lom staring hard at his thumb, which he was solemnly waggling.

"Playing with your fingers?" O'Leary snapped.

"Ah—not at all, my boy," Lom said, thrusting both hands into his pockets. "Tell me—what will you do when we reach the city?"

"I'll have to play it by ear. Once inside the palace, if I can just get a word with Adoranne . . ."

"Frankly, my boy—you look a trifle disreputable. Your garments are somewhat the worse for wear, and it appears you haven't shaved of late, and that gold earring in your left ear is hardly calculated to inspire confidence."

"I'll think of something. I'll have to."

As the sun cleared the treetops, they emerged from the woods onto a stretch of sloping pastureland dotted with peaceful cows, which gazed placidly at them as they tramped down to the road. A passing steam-powered wain gave them a lift to the city limits. As they walked through the cobbled streets, redolent of early-morning odors of roasting coffee and fresh-baked bread, a few early risers gave them curious looks. They paused at a sidewalk stall within sight of the palace towers, rosy-tinted in the early light, for a quick breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast and jam, which seemed to Lafayette to drop into an empty cavern the size of a municipal car-barn.

"It's amazing what a little food will do," he commented, as he finished off his second cup of coffee. "Suddenly, everything seems simpler. I'll go to the palace gates, explain that I have important information, and request an audience. Then, after I've told Adoranne a few things that could only be known to me—I'll explain who I am. After that it will be routine. By this time tomorrow, everything will be straightened out."

"I take it you know this Princess Adoranne personally?"

"Certainly. We're old friends. In fact, I was engaged to her once; but I realized in the nick of time that it was really Daphne I was in love with—"

"You—engaged to a princess?" Lom was looking highly sceptical.

"Sure—why not?"

Lom's mouth tightened. "Mr. O'Leary—this is hardly the time for leg-pulling. After all, if we've joined forces—"

"Who says we've joined forces? I let you come along for the ride, that's all, Lom. I still have no reason to trust you. In fact, I think this is where our paths should part. You go your way and I'll go mine."

"You promised to introduce me to your, ah, influential friends," Lom said quickly.

"Oh, no I didn't," Lafayette shook his head. "That was your idea."

"See here, O'Leary—or Zorro—or whatever your name might be," Lom

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said testily. "I can be of help to you; suppose you have difficulty in gaining entrance to the palace—"

"Don't worry about that; I'll manage."

"Then you intend to . . . to repay my efforts on your behalf by abandoning me here?"

"Why put it like that? I'll tell you what, Lom: if everything goes well, I'll look you up afterwards, and see what I can do for you, all right?"

"I want to do something—something positive, to demonstrate my usefulness. Now, if I go with you to the palace—"

"Out of the question. I might be able to talk myself inside, but you . . . well, candidly, Lom, you don't look particularly impressive, you know; in those tattered clothes and needing a haircut."

"Surely there's *something* I can do?"

"Well—all right, if you insist. Go find the Red Bull. Bring him to the palace. No, on second thought, make it the Axe and Dragon. If I flunk out at the palace, I'll meet you there. And if I make it—I'll send for you. OK?"

"Well . . . I'll do my best. The Red Bull, you say?"

"Sure. Ask around. Any pickpocket in town can help you. Now I've got to be off." Lafayette rose, paid for their breakfast with the lone silver dollar he had found in Zorro's pocket, and set off at a purposeful stride toward the palace.

3

THE BRASS HELMETED GUARD, resplendent in baggy blue knee-pants and a yellow and blue striped coat gave O'Leary a lazy up and down look.

"Get hence, Jack, before I run you in for loitering," he suggested curtly.

"I'm here on business," Lafayette said. "I have important news for Princess Adoranne."

"Oh, yeah?" The man shifted his arquebus casually. "What about?"

"Classified," O'Leary said. "Look here, we're wasting time. Just pass my request along to the sergeant of the guard."

"Oh, a wise one, eh?" The sentry growled. "Beat it, Greaser, while you still got the chanst."

"Like that, huh?" Lafayette said. He cupped his hands to his mouth:

"Sergeant of the Guard, post number one—on the double!"

"Why, you—"

"Ah-ah—don't do anything rash," O'Leary cautioned as the enraged man raised his bell-mouthed gun. "Witnesses, remember?"

"All right, what's this all about?" a short, plump non-com with a handlebar mustache swaggered into view. He halted, looked Lafayette up and down. His face turned an alarming shade of purple.

"Shorty!" Lafayette cried. "Am I glad to see you!"

"Grab that bum!" the sergeant roared. "That's the lousy punk that clobbered three o' my boys here Monday a week!"

4

IT WAS DIFFICULT, Lafayette conceded, to keep his voice cool, calm, and reasonable with three large men clamping his arms in pretzel-like positions behind his back, while

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dragging him across the cobbled court yard. Still, it was no time to give way to intemperate language.

"If you'd just—*ow!*—listen to what I have to say—*ouch!*—I'm sure you'll agree that what I have to report—*unh!*—is worth listening to."

"Yeah? Give him another quarter turn, La Verne!"

"Shorty—at least give me a hearing—"

"That's Sergeant to you, crumbum!" the five-foot-three arquebusier bellowed. "You can tell it to the judge—next month, when he gets back from his vacation!"

"I can't wait a month! It's an emergency!"

"If he says anything else, La Verne—stick a bandanna in his mouth. The one you use to mop off the back o' your neck on hot afternoon!"

They passed the stables, the harness room, turned into the serviceway that ran beside the royal pigpen. The guards recoiled as the imprisoned boar emitted a loud snort and threw his quarter-ton bulk against the fence.

"What's got into George?" La Verne inquired. "He ain't been hisself for a couple of weeks now."

"Maybe he knows we got a barbecue planned for next month," someone suggested.

"Nothing ain't been normal lately," La Verne mourned. "Not since—"

"Belay that!" Shorty yelled. "You slobs are at attention!"

Lafayette's escort hustled him up three steps into a small squad-room lit even at this hour by a forty watt bulb dangling from a kinked cord. An unshaven man in shirtsleeves sat with a boot propped on a battered desk, picking his teeth with a short dagger. He raised a sardonic eyebrow and reached for a form.

"Book this mug on suspicion, Sarge," Shorty said.

"Suspicion o' what?"

"Suit yourself. Forgery, maybe. Or Peeping Tom. Or watering wine. Just hold him while I work up a file on him that'll keep him on ice until they pension me off."

"This has gone far enough," Lafayette spoke up. "While you flatfeet jabber, the kingdom may be lost. I have to see Princess Adoranne, right now!"

The desk sergeant listened with his mouth slightly open. He looked Lafayette up and down, then turned an unfriendly eye on the mustachioed non-com who had arrested him.

"What's the idea bringing a looney in here?" he demanded. "You know all them nut cases go direct to the filbert factory—"

"Call Princess Adoranne," Lafayette said in a voice which cracked slightly in spite of his efforts. "Just request Her Highness to come down for a moment, all right?" He tried a friendly smile, which caused the desk sergeant to edge backward.

"Hold him, boys," he muttered. "He's getting ready to go violent." He dinged a bell on the desk; a door opened and an uncombed head of shaggy pale hair appeared, surmounting the thick-lipped, puffy-eyed face of a deputy.

"Oglethorp, slap a set of irons on this pigeon," he said. "Throw him in dungeon number twelve, at the back.

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We don't want him yelling and getting everybody upset—"

"Irons?" Lafayette yelled. "I'll have the lot of you pounding beats on the graveyard shift!" He jerked free, eluded a grab, made a dive for the door, hooked a foot over an out-thrust ankle and witnessed the finest display of pyrotechnics since the previous Third of October—Artesian Independence Day.

Hard hands were clamped on his arms, hauling him upright. He tried to move his legs, then let them drag. He was aware of descending stairs, of tottering along a dark, evil-smelling corridor, of a heavy iron gate being lifted. A shove sent him stumbling into a low-ceilinged room that stank of burning kerosene from the flambeaux mounted in brackets along the wall.

"I'm S'Laf'yet 'Leary," he mumbled, shaking his head to clear it. "I demand a lawyer. I demand to see Adoranne. I demand to send a message to my wife, Countess Daphne—" He broke off as his arms were twisted up behind him and held in a double come-along grip.

"Looks like the booze has rotted his wits out," the blond turnkey said, exhaling a whiskey breath into O'Leary's ear. "Stick him in number 12, Percy. All the way in the back."

"Sure, Oglethorp—but, geeze, I ain't swept 12 out in a while, an'—"

"Never mind coddling the slob. He's one o' them Peeping Irvings."

"Yeah? Geeze Oglethorp, is he the one they spotted last month, climbing the ivy for a glimpse o' Princess Adoranne taking a shower?"

"Never mind that, Percy! Lock him up, and get back to yer comic book!"

Percy, Lafayette noted vaguely, was even larger and less intellectual looking than Oglethorp. He allowed himself to be prodded along to the end of the dark passage, stood leaning dizzily against the wall as the jailer selected an oversized key from the ring at his belt.

"Say, pal . . . uh . . . how was it?" the lout inquired in confidential tones as he removed the handcuffs. "I mean . . . does her Highness look as neat in the nood as a guy would figger?"

"Neater," Lafayette said blurrily, rubbing his head. "That is . . . it's none of your business. But listen—this is all an error, you understand? A case of mistaken identity. I have to get a message to Countess Daphne or the Princess, and—"

"Yeah," the jailer nodded. As he thrust Lafayette into the tiny cell, from which a goaty odor wafted, O'Leary hardly noticed his hand brushing the other's side, his fingers nimbly plucking something away, palming it . . .

"That's why you was climbing the ivy, sure," Percy rambled on sardonically. "It's as good of a alibi as any, punk. I bet you never even glommed nothing."

"That's what you think!" Lafayette yelled, as the door slammed. He pressed his face against the bars set in the foot-square opening in the metal slab. "I'll make a deal: you deliver my message, and I'll tell you all about it!"

"Yeah?" Percy replied, somewhat doubtfully. "How do I know you ain't lying?"

"Even if I make it up, it'll be better

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than a comic book," Lafayette snapped.

"Nuts," Percy said loftily. "And anyways—the whole conversation is in lousy taste, considering."

"Considering what?"

"Considering the shape Her Highness is in." The jailer's lower lip thrust out. "Ain't it a crying shame?"

"Ain't what—I mean isn't what a crying shame?"

"That the Princess is laying at death's door—down wit' a fever which nobody don't know how to cure it—that's what! And Count Alain and the Lady Daphne along wit' her!"

"Did you say—at death's door?" O'Leary choked.

"Right, Bub. They was all took sick at once—a fortnight since—and they ain't expected to recover. That's how come King Lafayette had to take over."

"K . . . King Lafayette?"

"Sure. And the first thing he done was to beef up the guard force, which I was one o' the first hired. Where you been, anyways?"

"But . . . but . . . but . . ."

"Yeah—so don't crack wise," Percy said with dignity. "So long, hotshot. See you in Death Row."

5

LAFAYETTE sat on the heap of damp straw that was the cell's only furnishings, numbly fingering the knobs on his skull.

"Things couldn't go this wrong," he mumbled. "I must be the one who's feverish. I'm delirious, imagining all this. Actually, I'm in bed, being tended by Daphne—"

He broke off. "Hey," he said thoughtfully. "Daphne can't be sick in bed—I saw her at Central, going through rookie training, yesterday!" He jumped up, banged on the bars until Percy appeared with a napkin tucked in his collar, wiping his chin.

"You said that Countess Daphne's been sick in bed for two weeks?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"And she hasn't recovered?"

"Nope. Nor likely to, poor kid."

"How do you know? Did you see her?"

"Now I know you're loopy, Rube. I'll get a squint at her Ladyship in bed right after I get my promotion to Buck Admiral."

"Who says she's sick?"

Percy spread his thick hands. "It's what they call common knowledge. King Lafayette kept it quiet for a couple days, but then he had to let the word out, on account of everybody was getting a little uptight on account of they didn't see the Princess around and about, like." Percy took out a bone toothpick and gouged at a back tooth.

"Have you seen this King Lafayette?" O'Leary asked.

"Sure; I seen him yesterday, reviewing the guard. The poor guy looked pretty bad off, and I guess it figgers, wit' that snazzy little piece Countess Daphne about to croak, an' all—"

"What did he look like?"

"You know—kind of a skinny, long-legged kid wit' a bunch o' curly brown hair and a sort o' sappy smile—only he wasn't smiling yesterday. Boy, what a temper!" Percy shook his head admiringly. "The boys tell me it's the

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first time he ever had anybody horsewhipped, too."

"He's horsewhipping people?"

"Sure. Well, the poor slob's got a lot on his mind, like. I guess that's why he kicked the cat—"

"He kicked a cat?"

"Uh-huh. Tried to, anyways. I always heard he was a good-natured bozo, but I guess having your frail croak on you is enough to kind of give anybody a little edge on. That, and the war." Percy inspected his toothpick gravely.

"What war?"

"Geeze, Bub, you're really out of it, ain't you? The war wit' the Vandals, natcherly."

"You mean—Artesia's at war?"

"Naw—not yet. But any day now. See, these Vandals, they got this invasion planned, which they want to take over the country so's they can loot and rob and' all. What they'll do, they'll kill off all the men, and capture all the broads—"

"Who says so?"

"Huh? King Lafayette said so—the' first day after he had hisself coronated on account of the Princess being laid up—"

"When is all this supposed to happen?"

"Any day now. That's why everybody's got to turn in their cash and jewels, for the like war effort. Boy, you should of seen some o' the rich merchants howl when us boys was sent out to make some collections." Percy wagged his head. "Some o' them bums got no patriotism."

Lafayette groaned.

"Yeah, it's a heart-breaker, ain't it, pal?" Percy belched comfortably. "Well, it's about time fer my relief, Rube. Hang loose—as the executioner said to the customer just before he sprang the trap." Percy sauntered off, whistling. Lafayette tottered to a corner and sank down. Things were beginning to come into focus now. The plot was bigger and better organized than anything he'd imagined. There was an invasion, all right—but not from outside. The invader had saved a lot of time and effort by going right to the heart of things; It was a neat switch: invade the palace first, and take over the country at leisure.

"But how did he do it?" Lafayette got to his feet and paced.

"Let's say this Zorro stumbled onto some loot stashed by Goruble; Lom said the hills are full of caves full of the stuff. So—he got his hands on the Mark III, and discovered what it would do. He got to the Red Bull, and planted the infernal thing on me, knowing I'd be boob enough to push the button. When I did, he hurried off to the palace and took up where I left off. Only—" He paused at a thought.

"Only he didn't fool Daphne. Good girl! She smelled a rat, went to the secret phone in Nicodaeus' old lab, and called Central. They picked her up, and she reported . . . reported . . ." Lafayette paused, scratching his chin.

"What could she report? She noticed something wrong; she knows I never kick cats. But she had no way of knowing I was really this Zorro, masquerading as me. She'd just think that somebody had hypnotized me, or something. Whatever she said, she'd have a hard time getting those

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bureaucrats to listen. Their policy is minimum interference. If they checked, they'd find everything apparently normal. The most they'd do would be to send an agent in to look over the situation . . ." Lafayette halted and smacked a fist into his palm.

"Of course! What an idiot I was not to have spotted it sooner! Lom! He's a Central agent! That's why he knows all those things he shouldn't know! And no wonder he was suspicious of me! I claimed to be Lafayette O'Leary—the man he was sent here to investigate! No wonder he wanted to come into the city with me! He had to keep an eye on me! Only . . . . only why did he let me talk him into splitting to go off on a wild goose chase after the Red Bull . . .?"

Well, after all, the Red Bull was involved in this, right? Maybe he saw the chance to get filled in on the details of my story, figuring I'd be available whenever he wanted to get back to me. Or maybe—maybe he'd already become convinced of my innocence—or at least that things were more complicated than they looked—and he had to get off by himself to report back to HQ. That's probably it! He's made his report by now; he ought to show up any minute with a Central Enforcer squad to spring me, and get this whole mess straightened out!

At that moment boots sounded in the passage; O'Leary struggled to his feet, blinking at the glare of a lantern.

"Whatta ya mean, lost it?" said the heavy voice of Oglethorpe. "OK, OK, I'll use mine . . ."

An iron key clattered in the lock; the door swung wide. Beyond it, beside the hulking guard, Lafayette saw a small, silver-haired figure.

"OK, OK, let's go, chum," Oglethorpe rasped.

"Lom! You finally made it!" Lafayette started forward. A large hand against his chest stopped him in his tracks.

"Don't try nothing dumb, Clyde," Oglethorpe advised him in a patient tone, and administered a shove which sent O'Leary staggering back to rebound from the far wall, just in time to collide with Lom as he was pitched through the door. The heavy gate clanged shut.

"Well, we meet again, my boy," the old fellow said apologetically.

CHAPTER NINE

"YOU MEAN," Lafayette said in a sagging voice, "you're *not* a Central agent? You weren't sent here to investigate Daphne's report? You don't have an Enforcer squad standing by to put the arm on this bogus King O'Leary?"

Lom frowned at O'Leary. "You almost sound," he said, "as if you'd hoped I *was* a Central agent . . ."

"You don't deny you know about Central, then?" Lafayette leaped into the breach. "I guess that's something. Look here, Lom—just who *are* you? How do you figure in all this?"

"Just the question I was about to ask you," Lom countered. "Frankly—my previous theories seem somewhat untenable in light of the present contretemps."

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"What theories?"

"Not so fast, young fellow," Lom said in an entirely new tone. "I didn't say I was satisfied with your *bona fides;* far from it. As a matter of fact, it's obvious to me now that you're either innocent—a hapless victim—or more deeply involved than I'd thought. I sincerely hope you can establish that the former is the case . . ."

"Wait a minute. You sound as if I was expected to make excuses to *you!* If you're not a Central agent, then you must be in this mess up to your ears!"

"How does it happen," Lom demanded in a no-nonsense voice, "that you seem to be familiar with a device—the Mark III Focal Referent—which is a secret I had supposed to be known only to its inventor, and one other?"

"Easy; the Red Bull handed it to me—"

"A facile explanation, but hardly satisfying."

"I don't know why I'm alibiing in the first place," O'Leary snapped. "You're the one with some explanations to give. And don't try to snow me with that story about just happening to stumble on a cave full of just what you needed. If Central sent you here, well and good. They'd have supplied you, naturally. If not—then you must know a lot more than you're telling."

"Possibly," Lom said crisply. "Now, tell me: why were you roaming the hills in the first place?"

"What were you doing on the mountain top?" Lafayette came back.

"Why did you come here to Artesia City? Whom were you expecting to meet?"

"How do you know about Central? Nobody in Artesia ever heard of it, but me, and Daphne!"

"What's *your* connection with Central?"

"I asked you first!"

"What's he paying you?"

"What's who paying me?"

"*Him*, that's who!"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"I'll double his offer!"

"Talk or I'll twist that skinny neck of yours!"

"Lay a hand on me and I'll visit you with a plague of cramps!"

"Aha! Now you're a warlock!" Lafayette took a step toward the old man—and doubled up at a stab of pain under the ribs. He made a desperate grab, and yelped as his left calf knotted in a Charly-horse.

"I warned you," Lom said calmly.

Lafayette made one more try, was rewarded by a stitch in his side. He lurched back against the bars.

"Now talk," Lom snapped. "I want the whole story. What was your role supposed to be? How did you happen to fall out with him? That's why you fled to the hills, eh? But why did you come back?"

"You're babbling," Lafayette gasped, clutching his ribs. "I'm Lafayette O'Leary. Somebody tricked me . . . into this Zorro routine . . . so they could take my place . . ."

"Anyone who wanted to masquerade as O'Leary would simply have disposed of his person, not set him free to confuse the issue. No, my lad, it won't

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do. Now talk! The truth, this time! Or I'll give you a spasm of the eyeballs, a sensation you'll not soon forget!"

"You talk as if . . . you really didn't know," Lafayette managed, between pangs resembling, he suspected, those of imminent childbirth. His fingers encountered an object in an inside pocket, felt over it. He had a sudden, vivid recollection of those same fingers—Zorro's trained fingers—darting out deftly as Percy thrust him into the cell, lifting something from Percy's belt. He drew the object out, focussed watery eyes on it.

". . . don't know," Lom was still talking. "Even if I were convinced you were a mere dupe—which I'm not—"

"How," Lafayette cut in, "would you like to escape from this cell?"

"I should like that very well indeed," Lom spat. "But don't change the subject! I—"

"Take this whammy off me . . ." O'Leary panted, "and we'll talk about it."

"Not until you've made a clean breast of it!"

"Did you notice what I'm holding in my hand?"

"No. What difference would . . ." Lom paused. "It . . . it appears to be a large key of some sort. It's not—it's not the key to this door . . .?"

"It better be—or Zorro's fingers have lost their touch." Lafayette thrust the key out between the bars.

"Careful, my boy! Don't drop it! Bring it back inside, carefully!"

"Untie this knot in my duodenum!"

"I . . . I . . . very well!" Lafayette staggered at the sudden relief of the stomach cramp. "That was a neat trick," he said. "How did you do it?"

"With this." Lom showed an artifact resembling a ball-point pen. "A simple invention of mine. It projects a sound beam of the proper frequency to induce muscular contraction. You see, I confide in you. Now . . . the key, dear boy!"

"Deal," Lafayette said. "A truce between us. We join forces until we find out what's going on."

"Why should I trust you?"

"Because if you don't I'll pitch this key out of reach, and we'll both be stuck here. I won't be able to help Adoranne, maybe—but you won't be free to do her any more harm!"

"I assure you, that's the last thing I desire, lad!"

"Deal?" Lafayette persisted.

"Deal, then. But at the first false move—"

"Let's not waste time," Lafayette said, tossing the key to Lom. "We have some plans to make."

2

"GEEZE, don't you ever sleep?" Percy inquired aggrievedly as he halted before the cell door. "What you want this time? I told you already chow ain't til one pee em . . ." He broke off, peering between the bars into the gloomy cell. "Hey—it seems to me like there was another mug in here wit' youse. A little geezer—" He broke off with a grunt, doubled over, and went down. Lafayette thrust the door open and stepped over the prostrate turnkey as Lom came forward from the dark corner where he had lain in wait.

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"He'll be all right, won't he?"

"Ummm. I just gave him a touch of *angina*," Lom said offhandedly. "He'll be as good as new in half an hour. Now what?"

"There's still Oglethorpe to deal with. Come on." Stealthily, the escapees moved along the corridor, past empty cells, to the archway beyond which the corner of the warden's desk was visible, supporting a pair of size fourteen boots with well-worn soles.

"Give him a shot in the ankle," Lafayette murmurred. Lom eased forward, focussed his sound projector, pressed the stud. There was a muffled exclamation; a large, hairy hand came down to massage the foot. Lom administered a second dose; with a yelp, Oglethorpe swivelled his chair, swinging his feet out of sight as his head and shoulders rotated into view. Lom took careful aim and zapped him again. The big man roared and slapped his own jaw with a report like a pistol shot. As he jumped up, the old gentleman sighted on his lumbar area and gave him yet another blast. Oglethorpe arched backward, lost his balance, and cracked his head on the desk on the way down.

"Got him," Lom stated with satisfaction.

"You're going to have to simplify that procedure before it replaces a sock full of sand," O'Leary told him. "He made more noise than a rumble between rival gangs armed with garbage can lids."

"Still, we seem to have occasioned no alarm. After all, who would expect a jail break at this hour of the day?"

"Well, let's not just stand here congratulating ourselves. We've got ground to cover. Let's take a look in these lockers and see what's available in the way of disguises."

Five minutes of rummaging turned up a pair of shabby cloaks and a worn canvas pouch full of battered tools.

"We're plumbers," O'Leary said. "I'm the master pipefitter, and you're my assistant—"

"Quite the contrary," Lom interrupted. "A silver-haired apprentice would hardly carry conviction."

"All right—let's not fall out over a jurisdictional dispute," Lafayette adjusted the cloak to cover as much as possible of his grimy silk shirt and baggy satin trousers. In a desk drawer he found the keys to the heavy grate that barred the passage. They lifted it, occasioning a dismal groan of rusty metal, eased under, lowered it back in position. Ten feet farther, the passage branched.

"Which way?" Lom wondered aloud. "I confess I have no sense of direction."

"Come on," O'Leary said, leading the way toward a steep flight of stone stairs. At the top, a cross passage led two ways.

"To the left," Lafayette hissed. "We have to pass the squad room, so take it easy."

"How does it happen," Lom whispered, "that you know your way so well?"

"I did time down here the first week I was in Artesia. And since then I've been down a few times to visit friends."

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"Hmmm. You know, my boy, at times I'm tempted to believe your story . . ."

"Whether you believe it or not, we're in this together. Now let's go before we're arrested for loitering." Lafayette advanced stealthily, risked a peek into the room. Three arquebusiers were seated around a table spooning up beans, their shirts unbuttoned, their floppy hats laid aside, their rapiers dangling from wooden pegs on the wall. One of the trio looked up; his eyes met O'Leary's.

"Yeah?" he barked. "Who youse looking for?"

"Roy," Lafayette said promptly. "He said it was a hurry-up call."

"Shorty ain't on until six pee em. A hurry up call, hey? You must be the vet."

"Right," Lafayette improvised as the man rose and sauntered toward him, hitching at his purple and green suspenders. The cop eyed O'Leary's tool bag, prodded it with a thick finger.

"What's a vet doing wit' a bunch o' pipe wrenches?" he demanded. "And hack saws, yet. Youse ain't planning a jail break?" He grinned widely at the jape.

"Actually, we do a bit of plumbing on the side," O'Leary said. "We're combination animal doctors and plumbers, you see."

"Yeah?" the cop scratched the back of his thick neck. He yawned. "Well, if you can fix old George's plumbing, Jemimah'll be your friend fer life." He guffawed, cleared his throat, spat, and gave Lom a suspicious look.

"Ain't I see youse before, Pops?"

"Not unless you've been down with an attack of goat fever, Junior," the old man snapped. "And don't call me Pops."

"Well, we'd better be getting along," Lafayette said hastily. "Actually, it was a leaky faucet we were after. In the tower, Roy said. So—"

"Nix, Bub. Nobody goes up inna tower. Off limits, like. Quarantine."

"Yes. Well, Roy's point was that the drip was annoying the patient—"

"What patient? There ain't no patient inna tower. They're all in the Royal Apartment wing."

"The patient fellows on duty there, I was about to say," O'Leary recovered nimbly. "Just imagine pulling four on and four off with a leaky faucet going drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip . . ."

"Yeah, yeah—I get the idear. Well—as long as it's fer the boys. I'll send Clarence here along wit' youse." The NCO beckoned to a slack-faced loon with unevenly focussed eyes.

"That s all right, Lieutenant, we can find it—" Lafayette started; but the cop cut him off with a curt gesture.

"Nobody don't go inna tower wit'out he got a escort," he stated firmly.

"Well—in that case," O'Leary conceded the point. Clarence pulled on his coat, strapped on his sword, gave O'Leary a vague look and stood waiting.

"You, uh, kind of got to tell Clarence what to do," the NCO said to Lafayette behind his hand. "Like, in detail, if you know what I mean."

"Let's go, Clarence," Lafayette said. "To the tower."

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3

IN THE COURTYARD, bright with the late afternoon sun, Lom overtook O'Leary. "When are we going to dispose of this cretin and make our escape?" he whispered.

"Change of plan," Lafayette murmurred. "Getting Clarence was a big break. With an escort we can go where we want to."

"Have you lost your wits? Our only chance is to get clear of this place, and regroup!"

"Let's face it: we'd never get past the gate."

"But—what can you hope to accomplish, skulking about inside the lion's den?"

"Just as I told the gendarmes—the tower—up there." Lafayette pointed to a lofty spire soaring high in the blue sky, a pennant snapping from the flagstaff at its peak.

"Whatever for?" Lom gasped. "We'll be trapped!"

"Classified," Lafayette said.

"Hey," Clarence spoke suddenly in a hoarse whisper. "Hows come we're whispering?"

"It's a secret mission," O'Leary replied. "We're counting on you, Clarence."

"Oh, boy," Clarence said happily. Lom snorted.

Lafayette led the way into the palace proper via a side door—the same door through which he had left that night—only two weeks before, but seeming like a lifetime—for his ill-fated rendezvous with the Red Bull. Inside, he motioned Lom and Clarence along a narrow corridor that passed behind the State Dining Room. Through a half open door he saw the long tables spread with dazzling linen, adorned with colorful floral centerpieces—a glimpse of another life.

"Looks like they're making ready for a celebration," Lom observed.

"Yeah," Clarence nodded vigorously. "A big blow-out scheduled fer tonight. Duh woid is, duh king, he's gonna make a speech, which all duh notables dey'll be dere."

"Keep moving!" Lom hissed. "We'll be seen—and I doubt if the household major domos will be as readily satisfied with explanations involving medical ministrations to sick pipes as those flatfeet!"

"Hey—dat sounded like it could grow up tuh be a doity crack on us cops," Clarence muttered.

"No offense," Lom reassured him.

They resumed their cautious progress, paused at a brocaded hanging through which Lafayette poked his head to survey the mirrored grand hall. "Come on—the coast is clear."

"Where is everybody?" Lom queried. "The place is like a mausoleum."

"Never mind questioning our good fortune. Let's just take advantage of it."

They reached the back stairs without incident. On the second floor, they passed a red-eyed maidservant with a mop and bucket, who gave them a tearful look and hurried on. Three flights higher a guard lounged on the landing, reading a newspaper with the aid of a blunt forefinger.

"Whazzis?" he inquired, looking suspiciously at the two adventurers.

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"Who're these mugs, Clarence?"

"Dat's uh like secret," Clarence whispered. "Shhhh."

"Special mission," O'Leary amplified, "under the personal supervision of Sir Lafayette—"

"You mean King Lafayette, don't you, pal?"

"Right. Now, his majesty has his eye on you, corporal—"

"Corporal, my grandma's pickled bananas," the fellow growled. "I been in this outfit nine years and I ain't got stripe one yet."

"You'll have two, as soon as this job is over," O'Leary said. "I personally guarantee it."

"Yeah? Whom did you say you was, sir?"

"A . . . a person in whom his Majesty resides special confidence."

"And where do you think you're going?" the guard inquired as O'Leary started past him.

"Up there." O'Leary pointed.

"Uh-uh," the man planted himself in Lafayette's path. "Not without a OK from the sergeant, chum."

"Don't you think a king outweighs a sergeant, corporal?"

"Could be—but I work for the sergeant. He works for the lieutenant; *he* works for the captain; *he* works for the colonel—"

"I'm familiar with the intricacies of the military hierarchy," O'Leary snapped. "But we don't have time to waste right now going through channels."

"Nobody goes up without a pass," the guard said.

"Will this do?" Lom inquired at O'Leary's elbow. There was a soft *bzapp!* The unfortunate sentry stiffened, staggered two steps, and fell heavily on the purple carpet.

"Tsk. Drunk on duty," Lafayette said. "Make a note of that, Clarence."

They hurried on, Lom puffing hard, Clarence bringing up the rear, round and round the winding staircase. The steps narrowed, steepened between bare stone walls. The climb ended on a small landing before a massive wood-plank door.

"Wha . . . what's this?" Lom panted.

"This is as far as we go—without an understanding," O'Leary said. "Note the lock on the door. I know the combination. You don't."

"So?"

"Give me that trick ball-point, and I'll unlock it."

"Not likely," Lom snapped. "Why should I give a rap whether you unlock it or not?"

"Listen," O'Leary invited. From the stairwell, sounds were rising: sounds of alarm.

"They've found that chap we dealt with down below," Lom said. "We should have hidden him—"

"They'd have noticed he was missing. They'll be here in a minute or two."

"Trapped! You treacher, I should have known better—"

"Shhh! Clarence won't understand," Lafayette said softly as the guardsman arrived, breathing hard. "Anyway, we're not trapped—not if we hide in there." He hooked a thumb at the door.

"What's in there? Why did you lead me into a cul de sac—?"

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"It's Nicodaeus' old lab. He was an Inspector, sent in here by Central to investigate a Probability Stress. It's full of special equipment. We'll find everything we need—"

"Well, for heaven's sake, get it open, man!" Lom cut in as the sounds of ascending feet rang clearly from below.

"First, the zap gun, Lom. Just so you aren't tempted to use it on me."

"And what's to keep *you* from using it on *me?*"

"I won't—unless you make a false move. Make up your mind. We have about thirty seconds."

"Blackmail," Lom muttered, and handed over the weapon.

"Once inside we're home safe," O'Leary said. "Let's see, now. It's been a long time since I used this combination . . ." He twirled the dial; the feet pounding below came closer. The lock snicked and opened. O'Leary pushed the door wide.

"Clarence—inside, quick!"

The arquebusier stepped through hesitantly; Lom ducked after him. O'Leary followed, closed the door and set the lock.

"Full of equipment, eh?" Lom rasped behind him.

He turned; in the dim light filtering down through dusty clere-story windows, Lafayette stared in dismay at blank stone walls and a bare stone floor.

"Stripped!" he groaned.

"Just as I thought," Lom said in a deadly tone. "Betrayal. But I'm afraid you won't live to complete your plans, traitor!" Lafayette turned, was looking down the barrel of a slim, deadly-looking pistol.

"Another of your inventions?" he inquired, backing away.

"Quite correct. I call it a disaster gun, for reasons which you'll, alas, not survive to observe. Say your prayers, my boy. At the count of three, you die."

4

OUTSIDE, boots clumped on the landing. Someone rattled the door.

"Geeze, where could they of went?" a querelous voice inquired.

"Maybe t'rough duh door," another replied.

"Negative, it's locked, and nobody but King Lafayette don't know the combination."

"Nuts, Morton. Let's bust it down—"

"I says negative, Irving! They din't go that way! You must of give us a bum steer. They never come up here—"

"Where else could they of went? They gotta of went t'rough duh door!"

"They din't!"

"How do you know?"

"They din't because they cun't, rum-dum!"

The door rattled again. "Yeah—I guess yez'r right. Like you said, nobody but King Lafayette could spring dat latch."

The booted feet withdrew.

Lafayette swallowed hard, his eyes on the gun. "Well—what are you waiting for? They're gone. Nobody will hear you killing me. And I deserve whatever happens for being dumb enough to forget to search you."

Lom was frowning thoughtfully. "That fellow said . . . that only King Lafayette knew the combination. That

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being the case—how did *you* open it . . .?"

"We've been all over that, remember? You didn't believe me."

"You could have shouted whilst the men were outside. It might not have saved your life, but it would have cooked my goose. Yet—you failed to. Why?"

"Maybe I have a goose of my own."

"Hmmm. My boy, I'm inclined to give you one more chance—in spite of your having led me into this dead end. Just what did you intend to accomplish in this vacant chamber?"

"It shouldn't have been vacant," O'Leary snapped. "That lock is a special Probability Lab model, unpickable. But—somebody picked it." He frowned in deep thought. "I've noticed that there are residual traits that seem to stay with the flesh, even when the minds are switched. As Tazlo Haz, I could almost fly. And I mastered merging, with a little concentration." He looked at his hands. "And it would never have occurred to *me* to lift that key from Percy's belt—Zorro's fingers did it on their own. So—the fellow who's wearing my body must have gotten certain skills along with it—including the combination."

"Very well . . ." Lom half-lowered the gun. "Assuming I accept that rather dubious explanation: what do you propose we do now?"

"Are we partners again?"

"Of sorts. By the way, you'd better return the sonic projector."

Lom jumped as Clarence spoke at his elbow: "Hey—you guys gonna chin all day? Let's get duh secret pipes fixed and blow outa here. Duh joint gives me duh willies."

"Don't creep up on me like that!" Lom snapped. "As for you, O'Leary—or whoever you are: you've brought me here—now do something!"

Lafayette looked around the gloomy chamber. The last time he had seen it, the wall cabinets which now gaped empty had been crowded with cryptic gear. The Court Magician's workbench, once littered with alembics and retorts and arcane assemblies, was now a bare slab of stained marble. Above, where the black crackle-finish panel with its ranked dials had been, snarled wires protruded from the bare wall.

"Even the skeleton's gone," he lamented. "It was gilded. It used to hang from a wire in the middle of the room. Very atmospheric."

"Skeletons?" Lom rapped. "What sort of mumbo-jumbo is this? You said this fellow Nicodaeus was an Inspector of Continua, working out of Central—"

"Right—the skeleton and the stuffed owls and the bottled eye of newt were just window dressings, in case anybody stumbled in here."

"How did *you* happen to stumble in here? No self-respecting Inspector would allow a local in his operations room."

"I wasn't a local. And he didn't exactly allow me in. I came up here to find out what he knew about Princess Adoranne's disappearance. Frankly, I was ready to slit his weazand but he talked me out of it."

"Indeed? And how, may I ask? You seem remarkably pertenacious of

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erroneous theories."

"Your vocabulary gets more portentious all the time," O'Leary said. "He convinced me he was what he said he was—which is more than you've done."

"And how did he accomplish that feat?"

"He made a phone call."

"Oh? I was unaware that telephones were known in this Locus."

"They aren't. Just the one, a hot-line direct to Central. It used to be over there—" O'Leary gestured. "In a cabinet behind the door."

"This is all very nostalgic, I'm sure—but it isn't resolving the present contretemps," Lom said.

"Hey, gents," Clarence called from across the room. "What—"

"Not now, Clarence," O'Leary said. "Look here, Lom, it's not my fault the lab's been cleaned out. And it's not doing us any good to stand here and carp about it. We still have our freedom; what are we going to do with it?"

"You were the master-mind who had everything in hand!" Lom said testily. "What do *you* propose?"

"We have to put our heads together, Lom. What do *you* think we ought to do?"

"Hey, fellas," Clarence spoke up. "What's—"

"Not now, Clarence," Lom said over his shoulder. "Frankly, it looks to me as if we have no choice in the matter. We'll have to simply confront this King Lafayette—this false King Lafayette if your tale is to be credited—and . . . and . . ."

"And what? Invite him to hang us in chains from the palace walls?"

"Blast it, if I could only get my hands on my hands . . ." Lom muttered.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Forget I said it."

"You've got a thing about hands, haven't you?" O'Leary snarled. "Don't think I havn't seen you playing with your fingers when you thought I wasn't looking."

"I wasn't playing, you impertinent upstart! I was . . . oh, never mind."

"Go ahead," O'Leary said, and slumped against the wall. "You might as well snap your lid in your own way. Let's face it: we're at the end of our tether."

Lom laughed hollowly. "You know—I'm almost convinced, at last, that you're what you say you are. What a pity it's too late to do any good."

"Hey," Clarence said. "Pardon duh innerruption—but what's dis funny looking contraption, which I found it inna cupboard behind duh door?"

Lafayette looked dully toward the man. He went rigid.

"The telephone!" he yelped. "Don't drop it, Clarence!"

5

"CLARENCE, my lad, you're a genius," Lom chortled, hurrying forward. "Here, just hand me that—"

"Not on your life," O'Leary said, and elbowed the old man aside to grab the old fashioned, brass-trimmed instrument from Clarence. "Anyway, I'm the only one who knows the number!" He held the receiver to his ear, jiggled the hook.

"Hello? Hello, Central . . .?"

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There was a sharp *ping!* and a hum that went on and on.

"Come on! Answer!" Lafayette enjoined.

"Central," a tinny voice said brightly in his ear. "Number, please."

"It's—let's see . . . nine, five, three . . . four, nine, oh . . . oh, two, one-one."

"That is a restricted number, sir. Kindly refer to your directory for an alternate—"

"I don't have a directory! Please! This is an emergency!"

"Well—I'll speak to my supervisor. Hold the line, please."

"What do they say?" Lom asked breathlessly.

"She's speaking to her supervisor."

"What about?"

"I don't know—"

"Here—give me that telephone!" Lom made a grab; Lafayette fumbled the instrument, bobbled it, missed as Lom plunged for it. Clarence made a brilliant save an inch from the floor as the two staggered back in an off-balance embrace.

"Uh, no'm, it ain't," Clarence was saying into the mouthpiece as Lafayette extricated himself. "Name of Clarence: K..L..A..R..I..N..T..S . . ." He gave O'Leary an aggrieved look as the latter snatched the phone away.

"Yes? To whom did you wish to speak, sir?" a brisk voice said.

"Inspector Nicodaeus—only I understand he's on a field job somewhere—so just give me whoever's taking his place! I have vital information to report!"

"From where are you calling, sir?"

"Artesia—but never mind that—just give me somebody who can do something about—"

"Hold the line, please."

"Wait a minute! Hello! Hello?"

"What do they say?" Lom demanded.

"Nothing. I'm holding the line."

"O'Leary—if you lose that connection—"

"I know; it might be fifty years before I get through again."

"Ah, there, O'Leary?" a hearty voice came on the line. "Good to hear from you. All's now well, I take it?"

"Well? Are you kidding? It couldn't be worse! Adoranne and Alain are dying of some unknown disease, there's a phoney king going around kicking cats, and I'm trapped in the tower!"

"Here, who is this? I know O'Leary's voice, and this isn't it!"

"I've been all over that! I'm temporarily a fellow named Zorro, but actually I'm O'Leary, only somebody else is me, and he's running amok, and—"

"Look here, whoever you are—unauthorized use of the Central Comm Net is an offence punishable by fine, brainscrape, and imprisonment, or any combination thereof! Now, get off the line, and—"

"You're not listening! I'm in trouble! Artesia's in trouble! We need help!"

"I'm sure," the strange voice said icily, "that matters are now well in hand. You needn't trouble yourself further—"

"Trouble myself—are you out of your hairpiece? If those trigger-happy guards get their hands on me, it'll be

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the firing squad!"

"See here, fellow: just take your grievances to the agent on the scene. If you have a legitimate case, it will be looked into. Now—"

"Agent? What agent? *I'm* the Central agent here, and I've been faked out of position and—"

"The regular man, Mr. O'Leary, is incapacitated, it appears. However, a Special Field Agent was dispatched to the Locus some hours ago, with instructions to proceed direct to the palace and make contact with one Princess Adoranne. That being the case—"

"You've sent a special agent in? Here? To Artesia?"

"That's what I said," the voice snapped. "Now if you'll excuse me—"

"Where is he? How will I recognize him? What—"

There was a sharp click, and the wavering hum of a dead line. Lafayette jiggled and yelled, but to no avail.

"Well? Well?" Lom was fairly dancing with impatience.

"He hung up on me. But I managed to pry some good news out of him: they've sent another agent in, probably one of their best men, with full powers. He'll have things straightened out in a hurry."

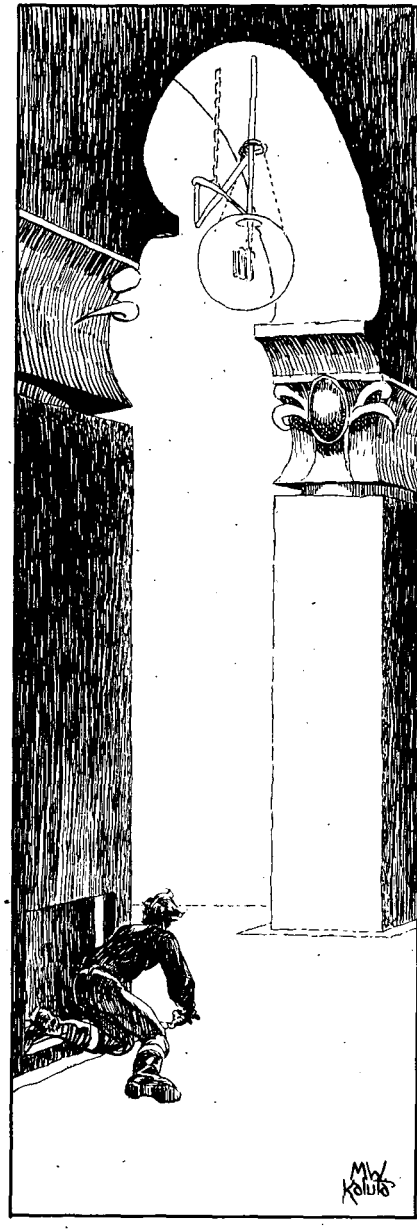
"Oh? Indeed. I see. Ha-hum."

"You don't seem overjoyed."

Lom pulled at his lower lip, frowning intently. "Actually," he said, "I'm not at all sure this is a desirable development at just this point."

"What's *that* remark supposed to mean?"

"Our antagonist, my boy, is a man of fiendish cleverness. At this moment he



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holds all the cards. Against him, a lone agent hasn't a chance."

"Nonsense. I admit the fellow may not know the score—having me not be me is a bit confusing. But all I have to do is make contact with this new Agent, fill him in on a few facts, and make the pinch—"

"But that may not be so easy. Remember: I have one vital datum that you lack."

"Oh? What's that?"

"I," said Lom, "know who the villain is."

CHAPTER TEN

"YOU COULD HAVE saved some time," Lafayette said, "if you'd mentioned this a little earlier."

"How could I? I thought you were his partner in the scheme."

"All right—who is he? Zorro?"

"Good heavens, no—"

"Not the Red Bull?"

"Nothing like that. You've never met him. The fact is, he's a renegade Commissioner of the Central Authority, by the name of Quelius."

"A commissioner? Ye gods—one of the top men—"

"Precisely. Now you can see the seriousness of his defection. I was his first victim. Then you. Now he's gobbling up an entire kingdom—and it will require a good deal more than honest intentions to topple the madman."

"All right—what's your suggestion?"

"First, we must make contact with this new chap Central's sent in, before he comes to grief. Presumably he's here in the palace by now, possibly in disguise. We'll attempt to intercept him when he calls on the princess."

"How are we going to recognize him?"

"I have," Lom said, patting his pockets, "a small ID device. When within fifty feet of a Central Authority ID card, it emits a warning buzz. Its failure to react to you was one of the principal reasons for my suspicions of you."

"Ummp. My ID is in a dresser drawer, downstairs."

"Quite. Now, at this point I suggest we divide forces. In that way, if one of us is caught the other may still get by in the confusion."

"Ummm. Shall we flip a coin?"

"I'll go first, dear boy. Now—what is the most direct route to the royal apartments?"

Lafayette told him. "Be careful," he finished. "There'll be guards six deep around the whole wing."

"Never fear, I shall make judicious use of the sonic projector. And I suppose you may as well have the disaster gun. But I'd suggest using it only in emergency. It's never been tested, you know."

"Thanks a lot." O'Leary accepted the weapon gingerly.

"Well—no point in waiting, I suppose. You follow in, oh, ten minutes, eh?" Lom moved to the door.

"Wait a minute," Lafayette said. "You've got your buzzer to identify the agent—but what do I use?"

"I should think any stranger might be a likely prospect. Ta-ta, my lad. I'll see you in court." The old fellow

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opened the door and slipped out. Lafayette listened. Two minutes passed with no audible alarm.

"So far so good," Lafayette murmurred. "Now it's my turn."

Clarence was sound asleep, sitting in a corner with his head tilted on one shoulder. He opened his eyes, blinking in a bewildered way when Lafayette tapped him on the knee.

"I'm going now, Clarence. You can go back to the squad room. If anybody asks, tell them we went home. And thanks a lot."

"Geeze," Clarence said, rubbing his eyes. He yawned prodigiously. "I wanna stay on duh job, boss. Dis cloak and dagger game is loads o' fun."

"Sure—but we need you back with the troops—someone who knows the score in case things go wrong."

"Yeah! Wow! Duh fellers won't never know I'm on a secret lay, which I'm woiking as usual wit' every appearance o' normality, an' all."

"That's the idea—" Lafayette jumped fourteen inches as a sharp ring sounded from the cabinet beside the door.

"Hey—dat sounds like duh doorbell," Clarence said. "OK if I answer it, boss?"

"It's the phone," O'Leary said, and grabbed it up. "Hello?"

"Oh, is that you?" It was the same voice he had last spoken to. "I say, look here, it appears something has come up; a Very Important Person wishes a word with you. Just hang on."

There was an electrical clatter, and a new voice spoke:

"Hello? This is Inspector Nicodaeus. To whom am I speaking, please?"

"Nicodaeus! Am I glad to hear from you! When did you get back?"

"Kindly identify yourself!"

"Identify myself? Oh, you mean because of the voice. Don't let that bother you—it's Lafayette. Just think of me as a little hoarse—"

"A little *what?* Look here, they told me there was a chap claiming to be O'Leary in another form, but nothing was said about *this!*"

"My voice," O'Leary said, striving for calm. "Not me. Listen, Nicodaeus—there's a serious emergency here in Artesia—"

"One moment," interrupted the voice on the line. "Tell me: what were the first words you ever said to me—assuming you are, as you claim, Sir Lafayette?"

"Look, is this necessary—"

"It is," Nicodaeus said in a tone of finality.

"Well—ah—I think you asked me where I was from, and I told you."

"Eh? Hmmm. Maybe you're right. I was thinking . . . but never mind. Now then: what was the object I showed you which first aroused your suspicions that I might be more than a mere Court Magician?"

"Let's see. A . . . a Ronson lighter?"

"By Jove, I believe you're right! Is that really you, Lafayette?"

"Of course! Let's stop wasting time! How soon can you have a couple of platoons of Special Field Agents in here to arrest this imposter who's rampaging around kicking cats and sleeping in my bed?"

"That's what I'm calling about, Lafayette. When I heard someone

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representing himself as you had been here at Central, I immediately looked into the situation—and what I've turned up isn't good—"

"I already knew that! The question is—"

"The question is more complicated than you know, Lafayette. Have you ever heard of a man named Quelius?"

"Quelius? Commissioner Quelius?"

"The same. Well, it seems that Quelius has run amok. He was Chief of Research, you know—"

"No, I didn't know—but I've already heard about him. Glad you confirmed what my friend Lom told me about him. But can't this discussion wait until after we've cleaned up this mess?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Lafayette! Quelius, it now appears, has absconded with the entire contents of the Top Cosmic Lab, including our top researcher, Jorlemagne. From bits and pieces of evidence, we've learned that he has perfected a device with which he plans to seal off the Artesian continuum from any further contact with Central—to shift the entire Locus, in effect, into a new alignment, rendering himself forever safe from apprehension—and placing Artesia forever under his domination!"

"I never heard of any such gadget! That's impossible!"

"Not at all; in fact, it's quite easy, it appears, once given the basic theory. You remember a device called a Suppressor?"

"How could I forget? If it hadn't been for that, I wouldn't be in the fix I'm in now! How about lifting it, so I can go into action?"

"I'm afraid that's already been taken out of our hands," Nicodaeus said grimly. "Phase one of Quelius' plan has already gone into effect. The first step was to erect a Suppressor barrier around the entire Locus, cutting off all physical contact. This went into action only minutes ago. Our sole link is now this telephone connection—"

"You mean—you can't send any more men in?"

"Or out. Now it's up to you, Lafayette. Somehow, you must locate this man Quelius and lay him by the heels before his second phase is activated and Artesia is cut off forever!"

"How . . . how much time have I got?"

"Not much, I fear. Minutes, perhaps; hours at best. I suggest you go into action with all haste. I needn't remind you what's at stake!"

"And there's *nothing* Central can do to help?"

"Candidly, Lafayette—if more than a single obscure Locus were involved—if there were an actual threat to Central—certain extraordinary measures *might* be taken. But as it is, only my personal, sentimental interest in Artesia caused me to attempt this call. The simplest solution for Central, you must understand, is to let the matter solve itself. No doubt that's precisely the policy on which Quelius is counting for immunity. Well, perhaps we'll surprise him."

"Me—single-handed—plus one Field Agent you're apparently ready to abandon? What can we do?"

"I'm afraid that's up to you,

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Lafayette," Nicodaeus said, his voice fainter now as the crackling on the line increased. "I have great confidence in you, you know."

"What does this Quelius look like?" Lafayette shouted.

"He's an elderly man—about five-three—has silver hair."

"Did you say five three, elderly—and has silver hair?"

"Correct. Not very formidable in appearance, but a deadly antagonist—"

"With a squeaky voice?"

"Why—yes! Have you seen him?"

"Oh, yes, I've seen him," Lafayette said, and uttered a hollow laugh. "I got him into the palace, past the guards, hid him until they were gone, gave him explicit directions for reaching Adoranne's apartment, patted him on the head, and sent him on his way . . ."

". . . fayette—what's that . . . hear you . . . fading . . ." The static rose to drown the faint voice.

"Chee, boss, what's duh matter?" Clarence inquired as O'Leary hung up the phone. "Youse are as white as a tombstone!"

"Under the circumstances, that's an apt simile." Lafayette chewed his lower lip, thinking hard. Lom—or Quelius—at least hadn't lied when he named the villain of the piece—had used him like a paper towel. He'd gotten himself thrown in the same dungeon, pumped him dry of information, and then removed himself to a place of safety, leaving a gullible O'Leary to fare forth into the waiting arms of the enemy.

"Well, I'll fool him on that point, anyway," O'Leary said aloud. "Clarence—how would you like to have a *real* under cover assignment?"

"Chee, boss! Great!"

"All right, listen carefully . . ."

2

"WAIT five minutes," O'Leary completed his instructions. "Then go into action. And remember: stick to your story, no matter what—until I give you the signal."

"Got it, Chief."

"Well—so long, and good luck." Lafayette opened the double glass doors that led onto the small balcony, stepped out into a drizzling rain under a sky the color of aged pewter.

"Splendid," he commented. "It fits right in with the overall picture." The iron railing was cold and slippery under his hands as he climbed over, lowered himself to find a foothold in the dense growth of vines below.

"Hey," Clarence said, leaning over to stare down at him. "A guy could like get hurt iff'n he was to fall offa dere."

"I've made this climb before," O'Leary reassured him. "In the dark. Now go back inside before you catch cold." He started down, wet leaves slapping at his face, icy water running down inside his sleeves. By the time he reached the stone coping twenty feet below, he was soaking wet. Carefully not looking down at the paved court a hundred feet beneath him, he made his way around the tower to a point above the slanting, copper-shingled roof of the residential wing. It was another fifteen foot climb down to a point where he could plant a foot on the

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gable, which looked far steeper and more slippery than he had remembered.

No time now for second thoughts, he told himself firmly, and leaped, throwing himself flat. His hands scrabbled at the wet surface; he slid down until his feet went over the edge; his shins, his knees—and stopped.

All right, heart; slow down. The heavy copper gutter was under his belt buckle. He hitched himself sideways to a point which he estimated was approximately opposite the window to a small storeroom, then lowered himself over the edge. The window was there, directly before him, three feet away under the overhanging eave. Lafayette swung a toe at the latch securing the shutters; they sprang open, banging in the wind. A second kick, lightly administered, shattered the glass. He tapped with his boot, clearing the shards away.

"All right, O'Leary," he whispered, eyeing the dark opening. "Here's where that book you read on acrobatics will come in handy."

He swung himself forward, back, forward, back—

On the forward swing he let go, shot feet-first through the window to slam the floor of the room rump-first.

3

"NOTHING BROKEN," O'Leary concluded after struggling to his feet and hobbling a few steps. He paused to listen to absolute silence. "No alarm. So far so good." He opened the hall door an inch; the passage was empty; not even the usual ceremonial sentries were on duty at the far end. Lafayette slipped out, moved silently along to the gilt and white door to the suite formerly occupied by a favorite courtier of Goruble's. There were no sounds from inside. He tried the latch; it opened and he stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

The room was obviously unused now; dust covers were draped over the furniture; the drapes were drawn, the windows shuttered. Lafayette went to the far wall, tapped the oak panels, pressed at the precise point in the upper left hand corner that Yockabump had pointed out to him, long ago. The panel swung inward with a faint squeak, and O'Leary stepped through into the musty passage.

"This is one ace Lom didn't know I was holding," he congratulated himself. "Now, if I can get to Adoranne before *he* does . . ."

It was a difficult fifteen minute trip through the roughly mortared secret passage system, up narrow ladders, under low-clearance beams, which O'Leary located with his skull, to the black wall behind which lay the royal apartments. Lafayette listened, heard nothing. At his touch the inconspicuous latch clicked open and the panel slid smoothly aside.

Across the deep pile rug he could see the corner of Adoranne's big, canopied four-poster bed. No one was visible in the room. He stepped out—and whirled at the sudden whistle of steel clearing a sheath. A sharp point prodded his throat, and he was looking down the length of a sword-blade into the square-jawed and hostile face of Count Alain.

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4

"HOLD IT, Alain!" O'Leary said with some difficulty, due to the angle at which his head was tilted. "I'm friendly."

"You have a curious manner of approach for one who means no ill, rascal!" Alain said. "Who are you? What would ye here?"

"I think I'd better let my identity ride for the moment; it would only complicate matters. Just think of me as a friend of Yockabump. He showed me the route here."

"Yockabump? What mare's tail's this? He lies in the palace dungeons, banished there by the madness of the usurper."

"Yes. Well, as it happens, I just escaped from the dungeon myself. Ah—would you mind putting the sword down, Alain? You'll break the skin."

"Aye—and a few bones beside! Speak, varlet! Who sent you here? What's your errand? Assassination, I doubt not!"

"Nonsense! I'm on your side, get it?"

A door across the room opened; a slim figure with golden hair and immense blue eyes appeared, clad in a flowing sky-blue gown.

"Adoranne—tell this clown to put the sword down before he gets into trouble with it," O'Leary called.

"Alain—who—?"

"A would-be assassin," Alain growled.

"A friend of Yockabump; I came to help!" O'Leary countered.

"Alain—lower your blade. Let's hear what the poor man has to say."

"Well, then: speak. But at the first false move! . . ." Alain stepped back and lowered the sword. O'Leary fingered his throat and let out a long breath.

"Listen," he said. "There's no time for formalities. I'm glad to see you two in good shape. The story is you're dying of a mysterious fever—"

"Aye, 'tis the lie spread by that treacher I once named as friend," Alain rumbled.

"There's a fellow on his way here—a man named Quelius, alias Lom." Lafayette described his former ally. "Have you seen him?"

Both Alain and Adoranne shook their heads.

"Good. He's the one who's at the bottom of this whole fiasco. Now, suppose you kids start by filling me in on the picture from your end?"

"Fellow, you're over-familiar—" Alain started; but Adoranne put a hand on his arm. "Hush," she said softly. "As you wish, friend of Yockabump. We, as you see, are held prisoner in our own apartments. His majesty assures us that it's but a temporary measure—"

"Majesty, my left elbow!" Alain cut in. "I knew the first time I laid eyes on the miscreant no good would come of him! King Lafayette indeed! Wait 'til I lay hands on the treacher's neck!"

"As I remember, you didn't do so well the last time you two had a run-in," O'Leary observed. "Anyway, maybe you ought to make a few allowances. Maybe it's not really Lafayette O'Leary at all, who from all reports is a prince of a fellow, and—"

"Think you not I know the oil-tongued wretch who once forced his

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way into Her Highness's good graces with his trickery, and—"

"Trickery! That was no trick, just superior personal magnetism. And killing Lod was a pretty hard thing even for you to brush off as sleight-of-hand—and how about killing the dragon? I suppose you could have done better?"

"Enough, sirrah!" Adoranne cut in. "Alain—stay to the subject."

"All right. So this blackguard, having lulled us into a false sense of security by lying low for a time, suddenly revealed his true colors. First, he came to her Highness with tales of an invading army. When, at my advice, she asked for evidence, he put us off with lies, meantime assuming what he termed emergency powers—which Her Highness had not authorized. When I complained—we found ourselves one morning locked in, under guard by coarse fellows, new recruited, in the pay of O'Leary. When next we had tidings, whispered through a keyhole by a loyal housemaid, the scoundrel had in sooth declared himself to be regent!"

"All right—it's about as bad as it could be," O'Leary said. "Now, there are angles to this that I can't explain right now—you wouldn't believe me if I did—but what it boils down to is that we have to nail this fellow Quelius. He's the real power behind the throne. The imposter who's claiming to be O'Leary is working for him—"

" 'Tis no imposter, but O'Leary's self!" Alain rasped.

"What makes you so sure? Did Lafayette O'Leary ever do anything before to make you doubt him? Hasn't he always been true-blue, loyal, brave, honest—"

"I never trusted the varlet," Alain said flatly. "His present demeanor but confirms my reservations."

"Speaking of confirmed reservations, we'd better travel," Lafayette snapped. "I can see there's no point in trying to explain anything to you, you fair-weather chum."

"Mind your tongue, lackwit, else I'll probe for your jugular with my point!"

"Yeah, sure. All right, let's stop wasting time. You two can make your escape via the secret passages. I'll wait here for Quelius to show. When he does I'll give him a shot from his own shooter." He patted the disaster gun in his belt.

"What? You think I'd flee and leave even a scurvey knave like you to face the foe alone? Hah! Adoranne, you go, and—"

"Don't prattle nonsense," the princess cut him off cooly. "I stay, of course."

"If this were an ordinary situation, I'd argue with you," Lafayette said. "But under the circumstances, you may as well. If I miss, it's all over for Artesia."

"How is't, sirrah, that you seem to be privy to information unknown to the general public—or even to Her Highness? Alain demanded.

"I'll explain all that later—if there is a later."

"Not so," Alain barked. "Who else but a lackey of the tyrant would know his plans?" The sword leaped out to prod O'Leary's chest.

"If you must know, I got the information from a place called

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Central!"

Alain and Adoranne looked at each other.

"Indeed?" the count murmurred. "That being the case, I suppose you'd be pleased to meet a fellow minion of this Central you speak of?"

"Certainly—but you're not supposed to know anything about Central. It's existence is a secret from everybody but accredited Central agents."

"Even so," Alain said. "And it happens, an emissary from Central arrived before you."

"That's right! I'd forgotten! Where is he?"

"Lying down in the next room. Adoranne—wilt summon the agent?"

The princess left the room. Lafayette heard low voices, then soft footfalls on the carpet. A slim, girlish figure in a trim gray uniform appeared in the doorway.

"Daphne!" Lafayette gasped. "What are *you* doing here?"

5

"YOU KNOW HER?" Alain said in an amazed tone.

"I thought you were safe at Central casting," Lafayette said, starting forward. "You poor kid, I knew they'd sent someone, but it never occurred to me they'd be idiots enough to—"

Daphne jerked a pistol from the holster at her waist, aimed it at O'Leary.

"I don't know how you know my name," she said in a voice with only the faintest quaver, "but if you take another step, I'll fire!"

"Daphne—it's me—Lafayette! Don't you know me?"

"What, you, too? Does everybody think I'm so addled I don't know my own husband?"

Lafayette moistened his lips and took a deep breath. "Look, Daphne—try to understand. I don't look like myself, I know. I look like a Wayfarer named Zorro. But actually I'm me, you see?"

"I see you're out of your mind! Stand back!"

"Daphne—listen to me! I stepped out that night—Wednesday, I think it was, two weeks ago—to, er, drop down to the A & D—and *this* happened to me! It's all because of a thing called a Focal Referent. A fellow named Quelius is responsible. He paid the Red Bull to entice me down there, and—"

"Stop it! You're not Lafayette! He's tall, and handsome, in a baby-faced sort of way, and he has curly hair and *the sweetest smile, especially when* he'd done something foolish—"

"Like this!" Lafayette smiled his most sheepish smile. "See?" He said between his teeth. Daphne yipped and jumped back.

"Not anything like that, you oily, leering, monster!"

"Look, Zorro can't help it if he has close-set eyes!"

"Enough of this, Varlet!" Alain roared. "Art daft, lout? Think you the Countess Daphne—and Her Highness and myself as well—know not this turncoat O'Leary on sight?"

"He's not a turn-coat!" Daphne cried, whirling on Alain. "He's just . . . just . . . sick . . . or something." She sniffled suddenly, and blinked back a tear.

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"Look, we can't have a falling out now over a little misunderstanding," Lafayette appealed. "Forget my identity; the important thing is that we stop Quelius—fast! He's got some sort of probability engine set up that will rotate Artesia right out of the Continuum! Once he does that, he's safe forever from outside interference from Central!"

"What do *you* know about Central?"

"Don't you remember? You saw me there, yesterday! You even helped me—"

"I saw another crazy man there who tried to convince me he was Lafayette O'Leary. I never saw you before in my life—or him, either!"

"Daphne—they were both me! I mean, I was both of them! I mean—oh, never mind. The point is—I'm on your side—and Adoranne's side. I just talked to Nicodaeus. He was the one who warned me about Lom—I mean Quelius!"

"Do you have any proof?"

"Well—nothing documentary—but Daphne—listen: close your eyes, and imagine I've got a bad cold, or got hit in the larynx by a polo ball, or something. Now . . . remember the night I met you? You were wearing nothing but soapsuds, remember? So I ordered up a nice dress for you to wear to the ball—a pink and silver one. And later that evening you saved my life for the first time by dropping the chamber-pot on Count Alain's head! And—"

"Who told you all this!"

"Nobody! It's me, I remember it! Just pretend I'm . . . I'm enchanted or something, like the frog prince. Inside this unwashed exterior is the same old Lafayette who wooed you and won you!"

"There *is* something . . . it's almost as if . . ."

"Then you do recognize me?"

"No! But . . . but I suppose there's no harm in listening to what you have to say—even if you are crazy."

"Well, that's something . . ."

"We've heard enough madman's raving," Alain said. "The question remains—what to do? We know the false king plans some great coup for this evening; the rumors make that plain. We must make our move before then—or not at all. I say the time has come for me to fare forth, beat my way through the usurper's hirelings who guard us here, and slay their master as he takes his place in the banquet hall!"

"You'd never make it, Al," O'Leary said flatly. "Anyway, there's no need for a grandstand play. We can use the secret passages and pop up in the ball room, surprise, surprise."

"If we can trust this intelligence of hidden ways . . ."

"Alain—he's our friend; I feel it. It almost seems I know him . . ." Adoranne looked searchingly at O'Leary. He sighed. "Let's not get me started on that again," he said. "What time is this big affair scheduled for?"

"Eight p.m.—about an hour from now."

"Unless I'm badly mistaken, you'll have callers before then—bound on the errand you thought I was on. Quelius can't afford to have you alive when his puppet springs his big announcement this evening. He probably figures on the confusion of the big dance to cover

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sneaking the bodies out of the palace. Later he'll make the sad announcement that you've fallen victims to the fever. Your showing up in good health will blow that plan off the map. After that we'll have to play it by ear."

"Once in the ballroom, in full sight of the people," Alain mused, "we'll be safe—for the moment. He'd not dare to cut us down before our subjects."

"And our very presence there," Adoranne added, "will give the lie to his claims of our indisposition."

Alain smacked a fist into his palm.

" 'Tis possible—but if this secret way leads into a trap . . ." Alain gave Lafayette a fierce look. "I know who will be first to die."

"Don't be nervous, Al—you'll get through all right," O'Leary assured him. "Now, I think you both ought to look your best, to properly impress the public. Medals, orders, jewels, tiaras—the works."

"You could do with a wash yourself, fellow," Alain addressed O'Leary. "There's a distinct odor of goat about you."

"A bath?" Lafayette said wonderingly. "I'd forgotten such things existed."

"In there." Alain motioned along a short passage toward a door through which were visible pale green tiles and golden fittings. "And you may burn those garish rags; I think my footman's attire will fit you well enough."

"I guess I can spare the time," Lafayette said, heading for the bathroom.

For a quarter of an hour O'Leary luxuriated in hot, scented water, scrubbing his skin with violet soap until it tingled.

"Easy, boy," he advised himself. "You'll wash all the hide off. Some of that dark shade is permanent . . ."

Afterwards, he shaved, deciding to retain Zorro's mustache, trimmed drastically to an Errol Flynn effect with a pair of fingernail scissors, which he also employed on his fingernails. His glossy blue-black hair was also trimmed lightly and towelled dry, after which, with a minimum of brushing, it fell into a rather dashing natural *coif*.

Alain had laid out clothing in the anteroom. Lafayette put on clean underwear, tight black pants, a white shirt with baggy sleeves and an open collar. Before adding the black coat provided, he donned the scarlet cummerbund from his former outfit—a recent acquisition, apparently, almost unsoiled. Of necessity he also retained the gold rings on his fingers, as well as the one in his left ear, since they seemed to be permanently attached.

He strolled back along the passage into the drawing room; Daphne turned with a startled expression.

"Oh—it's you. You look —different."

"Where are Adoranne and Alain?"

"In their budoir, dressing."

"You look pretty cute in that uniform, Daphne," O'Leary said. "But I liked you better in soapsuds."

"Please—spare me these fanciful reminiscences, sir! I have no choice but to work with you. But it's silly for somebody who doesn't have the remotest resemblance to Lafayette to attempt to impersonate him!"

"Well—I guess I'll have to settle for

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a platonic relationship. But it's hard, Daphne. You'll never know how I've missed you these past two weeks, how I've wanted to take you in my arms, and—"

"Don't be impertinent," Daphne said mildly. "You'd best fill me in on the plan."

"Oh, the plan. Well, frankly, the plan needs work. Daphne, did you know you have the most beautiful eyes in the world?"

"Do you really think so? But never mind that. We must talk of what we'll do when we reach the ballroom."

"Well, this fellow Quelius is a potent operator. Our only chance is to sneak up on him and nail him before he can use his sonic projector. Do you know, your hair is like spun onyx. And even in that uniform, your figure is enough to break a man's heart at a hundred yards."

"Silly boy," Daphne murmurred. "I must say you look better with a shave. But we really can't stand here chattering all day . . ." She looked up, into Lafayette's face as he came up to her. His arms went around her. She sighed and closed her eyes, her lips upturned . . .

"Hey! What are you doing!" he said suddenly. "Kissing a stranger, eh? I'm surprised at you, Daphne!"

She stiffened, then stepped back and swung an open-handed slap that sent him staggering.

"Here—what's this?" Alain spoke up from behind O'Leary. He stood in the doorway, resplendent in a dashing costume of blue and scarlet.

"It's quite all right," Daphne said haughtily, turning her back on O'Leary. "I've dealt with the matter."

Alain gave O'Leary a crooked smile. "The lady is abominably true to her marriage vows," he commented, rubbing his cheek reminiscently.

Adoranne appeared, regal as a fairy queen in silver gown and diamonds. She looked from Alain to O'Leary to Daphne, standing at the window with her back to the room. She went to her, put an arm around her waist.

"Never mind, Daph," she whispered. "I know some day Lafayette will come to his senses."

Daphne sobbed once, dabbed at her eyes, then turned, straight-backed. At that moment there was a peremptory knock at the outer door.

"I think it's time to go," she said.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TEN MINUTES LATER they were crowded in the stuffy chamber scarcely a yard deep, ten feet long, concealed in the thickness of the wall behind the ballroom.

"Now, remember," Lafayette said. "Adoranne, you and Alain give me time to get in position. Then wait until this phoney's just about to make his big announcement—then spring it on him. Just behave as if everything were normal: this is just a delightful surprise, you recovered unexpectedly, and here you are to join the fun. He'll have to play up to it. And while he's busy trying to regroup, I'll have my chance to take a crack at him."

"But—that will be dangerous for you!" Daphne said. "Why don't we draw lots—or something?"

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"He knows all of you; I'll be a stranger to him, a nobody. He won't be watching me."

"He's right, girl," Alain muttered. "But I'll stand ready to join in as opportunity offers."

"All right—here I go." Lafayette pressed the latch, the panel rolled aside, and he slipped through into the dazzle of light and the babble of conversation. The football-field-sized white marble floor was crowded with guests in laces and satins, gold braid and glittering jewels, aglow in the polychrome light from the great chandeliers suspended from the gold-ribbed vault of the high ceiling.

Solemn-looking guards in uniforms with unfamiliar armbands were posted at twenty-foot intervals against the brocaded walls, he noted. By sheer luck he had emerged midway between two of them. A few familiar faces turned casually to glance his way; but most of those present kept their eyes fixed firmly on the great golden chair set up at the far end of the room. And in spite of the superficial appearance of casual gaiety, there was an air of tension, a note of anxiety in the laughter and chatter.

Lafayette moved along the fringes of the crowd unchallenged. He took a drink from a passing tray and downed it at a gulp.

Abruptly, horns sounded. Silence fell, broken by a few nervous coughs. The wide doors at the opposite end of the room swung wide. A second fanfare blared. Then a tall, slender, fair-haired man appeared, strolling through the archway with an air of negligent authority. He was dressed in yellow silks adorned with white ermine, and a light-weight sport model crown was cocked at a jaunty angle on his head.

"Why, the poor stumble-bum looks like a complete nincompoop!" O'Leary muttered aloud. "Doesn't he know yellow takes all the color out of my complexion?"

"Shhh!" hissed a stout nobleman in purple at Lafayette's elbow. "His spies are everywhere!"

"Listen," O'Leary said urgently. "That popinjay isn't the real—"

"Oh I know, I know! Hold your tongue, sir! Do you want to get us all hanged?" The man in purple moved off quickly.

The regent sauntered across to the dias, stepped up assisted by a cluster of courtiers, and seated himself grandly in the ornate chair. He tucked one foot back, thrust out the other, and leaned forward, resting his chin on one fist.

"Ha! Just like Henry the Eighth in a grade B movie," O'Leary murmurred, netting several apprehensive looks from those about him. As he made his way closer a functionary—a former second assistant stock room tallier, Lafayette saw, now decked out in full ceremonial garb—stepped forward, cleared his throat, unrolled a scroll with a flourish.

"Milords and ladies, his Royal Highness, Prince Lafayette, will graciously address the assemblage," he piped in a thin voice.

There was a patter of applause. The man in the golden chair shifted his chin to the other fist.

"Loyal subjects," he said in a mellow tenor, "how I admire your brave spirits—your undaunted

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gallantry in joining me here this evening—defying gloom, rejecting the melancholy counsels of those who would have us quail before the grim spectre now hovering over our beloved Princess and her esteemed consort. If they could join us this evening, they would be the first to applaud you, carrying on in the gala mood they loved—love, that is—so well." The regent paused to shift position again.

"Look at that dumbbell, trying to talk with his jaw on his fist," Lafayette whispered to no one in particular. "He looks like a terminal paresis case."

Several people moved away from him; but one wizened little fellow in scarlet velvet muttered "Hear! Hear!"

"Why is everybody standing around listening to this clown?" Lafayette asked the old gentleman. "Why don't they do something?"

"Eh? You ask a question like that? Have you forgotten Sir Lafayette's many services to the crown—and the squads of armed bravos he's lately hired to help secure his continued popularity, the while he so unselfishly volunteers his services during our ruler's indisposition?"

"Lord Archibald—what would you say if I said Adoranne's not really sick at all?" Lafayette inquired, *sotto voce*.

"Say? Why, I'd say you were prey to wishful thinking. And have we met, sir?"

"No—not exactly. But if she *were* actually well—just being held incommunicado . . .?"

"Then all the cut-necks in Hell wouldn't restrain my sword from her service, sir!"

"Shhh! Good boy, Lord Archie—and keep your eyes peeled." O'Leary moved off as the regent droned on, took up a position some ten yards from the speaker, in the front rank of the crowd.

". . . it is therefore incumbent on me—a realization to which I come with inexpressible reluctance—to formally assume a title commensurate with the dignities residing in the *de facto* Chief of the Artesian state. Accordingly—and with a heavy heart—" The regent broke off as his eye fell on O'Leary. For a long moment he gazed blankly at him. Suddenly he jerked upright, his eyes blazing, pointed a finger at O'Leary.

"Seize me that traitor!" he roared.

2

THERE WERE small shrieks and muttered exclamations as a squad of strong-arm men jostled their way through the press to grab Lafayette by both arms and the back of the neck. He landed one solid kick to a uniformed kneecap before a double wrist lock immobilized him.

"Don't kill him yet!" the regent yelled; then, as startled faces jerked around to stare at him, he managed an undernourished smile. "I mean to say, remember the prisoner's constitutional rights, lads, and treat him with all due gentility."

"What's the charge?" O'Leary croaked, speaking with difficulty because of the awkward angle at which his chin was being crushed against his sternum.

"Take him away," the regent snapped. "I'll question him later."

"One moment, if you please, sire!" a

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cracked voice piped up. Lord Archibald pushed his way forward to stand before the golden chair.

"I, too, would like to know the nature of the charge," he said.

"What's this? You dare to question me—that is, ah, why, my dear Archie—suppose we discuss the matter later—in private. Security of the realm involved and all that—"

"Sire, the security of the realm is involved at any time that one of her citizens is arrested arbitrarily!"

There was a small murmur of assent that faded swiftly as the man in the chair thrust out his lower lip and frowned down at the crowd.

"I perceive," he said in a lowering tone, "that the time has come for the enforcement of more stringent wartime regulations regarding free speech—or more properly—treason!"

"Treason against what, Messire?" Archibald persisted.

"Against me, your sovereign!"

"Princess Adoranne, sire, is *my* sovereign!" the old nobleman said loudly.

"I may as well tell you—your Princess is dead!"

There was an instant, dead silence. And in the silence, a clear feminine voice spoke:

"Liar!"

All heads whirled; Adoranne, radiant in silver and pearls, her long hair floating like a golden fog behind her, advanced through an aisle that opened magically before her. Behind her, Count Alain strode, tall and impressively handsome in tailcoat and spurs. Daphne followed, trim and beautiful, her face rigid with tortured emotions.

Bedlam broke out. Cheers, laughter shouts of joy; elderly nobles went to one knee to kiss their princess's hand; younger ones brandished their dress swords overhead; ladies curtseyed until their wimples swept the floor, and rose, wet-eyed to embrace the person nearest. Lafayette jerked free of the suddenly nerveless grips on his arms to see the regent leap to his feet, his face twisted with rage.

"Imposters!" he roared. "Mummers, tricked out to resemble the dead! I myself witnessed the demise of Her Highness but an hour since, and with her last breath she charged me with the solemn duty of assuming the crown—"

"Let me at the conscienceless swine!" Alain roared, leaping onto the dias.

"No!" Daphne shrieked, and threw herself at him, impeding his draw as the pretender scuttled backward. "He's not a traitor, Alain! He's just tempoorarily lost his wits!"

"Grab him!" O'Leary yelled. "But don't hurt him," he added.

"Right!" Lord Archibald chirped as he bounded forward, chrome plated blade bared. "We need the scoundrel in one piece for trial!"

There was a sudden disturbance behind Lafayette; he turned to see a familiar figure thrusting toward him.

"Lom!" he blurted. "Or should I say Quelius?" He reached for the little man—and froze as the sonic projector swung to cover him.

"Wait!" Lom shouted. "Don't do anything foolish! You don't know—"

"I know I want to get my hands on your skinny neck!" O'Leary yelled,

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and charged.

"No! You don't understand! We have to—" Lom broke off, ducked under O'Leary's clutch, whirled to face the dias.

"Quelius!" Lom roared. "Stand where you are! It's all over!"

Lafayette checked in mid-stride as the usurper spun to face Lom.

"You!" the regent said in a strangled tone. "But—but—but—"

"That's right—me!" Lom yelled, as the man on the dias fumbled in his robes, drew out an object the size of an electric can-opener, fumbled with it—

A soundless detonation sent O'Leary whirling off into lightless depths.

2

THE STARS were rushing toward him; they struck with a ghostly impact, blasting him outward in the form of an expanding shell of thin gas. Gazing inward from all points of the compass at once, he saw all the matter in the universe, gathered at his exact center, dwindle to a single glowing point and wink out. At once he was collapsing inward, shrinking, compressing. There was a momentary sensation of searing heat and crushing weight—

He was stumbling backward, to fetch up hard against folds of a velvet hanging against the wall. Something heavy slid down over his right eye, clanged to the floor and rolled. Below him, the man he had known as Lom looked swiftly up; his eye—as piercing as a red-hot needle—fell on O'Leary. His mouth quirked in a smile of ferocity; he raised the sonic projector—and uttered a yell as Sir Archibald brought the dull edge of his sword down on his wrist, knocking the weapon across the floor.

"I said he'll live to stand trial, you old goat!" the elderly courtier snapped. "Seize him, gentlemen! And the false regent as well!"

Eager hands grabbed Lom, who kicked and cursed in vain. And elegantly manicured hands fell on O'Leary, dragged his forward and held him, as the crowd stared up at him, wide-eyed.

"Alain," Lafayette barked. "Let go, you big oaf! It's all right now! I've got my own shape back—"

"Have done, false rogue, or I'll take pleasure in snapping your spine!"

Below, a swarthily handsome fellow in tight-fitting black with a red cummerbund stood gaping about him with an expression of total wonder.

"Zorro!" O'Leary yelled. "Tell them you're you! That you're not me anymore! I mean, that I'm not you anymore!"

"Think not to cop a plea of insanity!" Alain growled in O'Leary's ear. "There's a VIP dungeon ready and waiting for you, turncoat rebel!"

"I'm not insane! I'm Lafayette O'Leary! I was somebody else, but now I'm me again, can't you understand, you numbskull? And we're not out of trouble yet—"

"How could you?" a tearful feminine voice spoke near at hand. Daphne stood there, looking up into his face. "Is it really you, Lafayette—or was that man telling the truth? That somehow you aren't really you, and—"

"Daphne—before I wasn't me—but now I am, don't you see? I'm Lafayette

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O'Leary, nobody else—"

"Did somebody call for Sir Lafayette?" a deep voice boomed. Clarence appeared, making his way through the crowd with a pleased smile on his face. "Dat's me," he announced, indicating himself with a thumb. "Anybody want to make sumpin of it?"

"No, Clarence, not now!" O'Leary shouted. "Corn meal mush!"

"Don't pay no never mind to dat bozo," Clarence exhorted the crowd. "He's a ringer. Me, I'm duh McCoy."

"Zorro!" O'Leary appealed to the Wayfarer. "I told Clarence to stick to his story until I said 'corn meal mush'. I mean until *you* said 'corn meal mush'. That is, I was you then, and what I meant was—"

"*I*'m duh real O'Leary!" Clarence roared.

"No he's not!" Daphne cried. "*He* is!" She pointed at Zorro, who goggled at her in astonishment. Daphne rushed to him, threw her arms around his neck.

"I recognized you in spite of your—your disguise—as soon as you laid hands on me," she sobbed.

Zorro stared over her head; his look of amazement gave way to a delighted smile.

"You bet, keed," he said.

"Daphne!" O'Leary yelled, "get away from that degenerate! Clarence—" A loud screech cut across the room. There was a stir in the crowd, cries of outrage as a small, furious figure in a scarlet skirt, a shiny black blouse, and jingling earrings forced her way through the press, followed by half a dozen olive-hued, black haired barbarously attired Wayfarers.

"Gizelle! Luppo! What are *you* doing here?" O'Leary gasped. The girl burst through the front rank and threw herself at Zorro, who leaped from Daphne's embrace to dive for cover as his enamorata's knife whistled past his ribs.

"Peeg! Lecher! Philanderer!" Gizelle shrieked as her arms were seized and the knife clattered away. "Wait unteel I get my hands on you, you sneaky, feelthy worm in the weeds you!"

"Hey! Watch him!" Lafayette shouted—too late. Lom, his captor's attention distracted by the disturbance, wrenched free, ducked to catch up Gizelle's knife, darted to Daphne, now standing alone, seized her by the arm and whirled to face the crowd, holding the point of the stiletto at his captive's throat.

"Back!" he barked. "Or I slit it from ear to ear!"

Women screamed; men uttered oaths and grabbed for their sword hilts; but they fell back.

All but one man. O'Leary stared in horror as a tall, white-bearded patriarch in a glowing blue robe circled behind Lom, unseen.

The latter backed slowly, his eyes darting from face to face; he stooped, scooped up the object that the regent had been holding at the moment of O'Leary's transfer back into his original body.

"No!" Lafayette yelled, and plunged against the men holding him. "Don't let him—"

Lom uttered a shrill laugh. "Don't *let* me? Ha! Who can stop me?"

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The tall man in blue tapped Lom on the shoulder.

"I can," he said in a tone like the tolling of a bell.

Lom whirled to goggle at the tall apparition that had appeared so suddenly behind him.

"Jorlemagne!" he gasped. He dropped the knife, clutched Daphne to him, thumbed a control on the bottom of the device in his hands—and with a sharp *whop!* of imploding air, vanished.

3

FOR THE NEXT two minutes, bedlam reigned. Lafayette made a frantic try for freedom, received a stunning blow on the skull, then hung dazedly in the grasp of the vigilantees. Confused images whirled in his brain, blended with the cacophony of a hundred voices raised in simultaneous hysteria.

"Quiet!" a thunderous tone broke through the hubbub. "Ladies and gentlemen—quiet! I must have silence in order to think!"

"Who might you be, sir?" "Where did he go?" "What happened to Countess Daphne?" The clamor broke out again at once.

"I said *quiet!*" the old man roared; he made a curt gesture—and sudden, total silence fell. O'Leary could see lips moving feebly, but not a sound was audible. The crowd stood as if bemused, staring at nothing.

"Well, that's better," the old man in blue said, his voice alone audible. "Now . . ." He half closed his eyes. "Hmmm. Quelius is a tricky devil. Who'd have thought *he'd* have thought of using the Mark III in that fashion? And where would he have fled? Not the caves . . . He knows I know . . ."

Lafayette! Help! a silent voice rang in O'Leary's ears—or no—not in his ears. Inside his head.

Daphne! Where are you! He cried silently.

It's dark! Lafayette! Lafayettte . . !

The elder in blue was standing before him.

"Lafayette—it is *you*, isn't it? Oh, it's all right; you may speak."

"I've got to get out of here," O'Leary said. "Daphne needs me—"

"Lafayette—don't you know me?"

"Sure—I saw you in a cave, you climbed out of a coffin and tried to bite me!"

"Lafayette—I'm your ally! You knew me as Lom, an assumed name, true, but then I was hardly in a position to trust you, eh? My real name is Jorlemagne."

"*You're* Lom? Are you out of your mind? Lom is a little shrimp under five six with silver hair and—"

"Surely you, of all people, can understand, Lafayette! Your description is of Quelius! I was caught by surprise, or he'd never have succeeded in exchanging identities with me!"

"You mean—you were Lom? And Lom was—"

"You! Simple enough, eh, now that I've explained it?"

"Wait a minute: even if you *are* Lom—or Jorlewhatsit—or whoever that was I made the jailbreak with—what makes you think I think you're any friend of mine? The way I analyzed the situation, you conned me

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into sneaking you into the palace so you could join forces with your sidekick, played by me—"

"But you were wrong, my boy, eh? What need to enter the palace by subterfuge if I were in fact in league with Quelius? Actually, on leaving the tower, I was trapped in a broom closet for the better part of half an hour by four palace guardsmen playing a serreptitious game of chance. When they were called away to attend a disturbance in the ballroom, I followed."

"And another thing: I've been thinking about that sudden trip to Thallathlone—wings and all. Not your doing, I suppose?"

"Oh, that. Pray forgive me, lad. At that point I was under the not unwarranted impression that *you* were Quelius' dupe. I employed a sophisticated little device which should have phased you back into what I assumed was your natural Locus—namely, Central. But naturally, since you were in fact the O'Leary ego, from Colby Corners, occupying the Zorro body—native to Artesia—the coordinates I used had the effect of switching you right out of the base-plane of the continuum. But I did keep tabs on you, and make contact as soon as you phased back in, you must concede that."

"All right—that's all gravy over the tablecloth now. What about this Quelius?"

"Ah, yes. Quelius. He planned his operation with care—but right at the beginning he made a slip. His original intention was to displace my ego into the body of a prize hog, and store my body—as well as his own—the Lom body, occupied by the mind of a pig—in a stasis tank for future use; but I was able to effect a last second baffle and shunt my ego into his *corpus*, while the pig-mind occupied my unconscious body. You see?"

"No. And where was he in the meantime?"

"Oh, Quelius assumed the identity of a chap who happened along. Just as a stop-gap, you understand. His real objective was to exchange identities with you."

"You mean—that wasn't really the Red Bull I met at the Axe and Dragon?"

"A large chap with bristly hair? That sounds like him. Then, after you'd been finessed into activating the Mark III, he would take over in your place, whilst you were gathered in by the local constabulary. The first part of the plan succeeded—but you slipped out of his hands somehow."

"Well—I guess I should be grateful to Luppo for that. But how did you get your own shape back?"

Jorlemagne chuckled. "I put Quelius on the spot—with your help, of course. When I pointed the sonic gun at him, he panicked and shifted back into his own body—which of course displaced me from it, to resume my own. Which in turn forced the pig personality back into its pig-body, etc, etc." Jorlemagne wagged his head. "I came to myself leaning against the royal pig sty, looking yearningly at a prize sow."

"Well—this isn't finding Quelius," O'Leary said. How did he do that disappearing act? One second they were here, and the next—phhtt!"

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THE MAGIC

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FLUTE

by
DAVID V. REED

Perry Thorpe was in a rage when the flute's sour notes ruined his concert; he blamed the flute, but that was a mistake—as he found out to his terror!

FAMOUS FANTASTIC CLASSIC

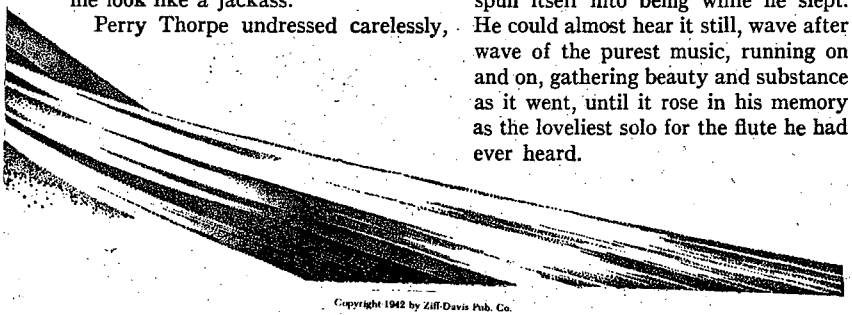
"WE'VE been through a lot together, but this is the end. The truth is—you're no good." Perry Thorpe looked at the flute that lay in its case beside him, where he had tumbled into bed. He ran his fingers tenderly over the silver flute. "You made a monkey out of me tonight," he said aloud. "Disgraced me at a party and made me get drunk."

Frowning, and staggering more than walking, Thorpe carried the flute to his desk. "Hear me?" he said. "I used to think of you as something almost human, something with a soul. And what did I get? Took you to a party where there must have been a dozen beautiful girls, and you sounded like a foghorn. That damned saxophone player had everybody listening to him. Here I've been practicing for years, watching out for you in bad weather, and you let that saxophone player make me look like a jackass."

Perry Thorpe undressed carelessly, still mumbling to the flute, and got into bed in the dark room. "I was a bore —that's what I was! There isn't a good tune in you! You're a flop!"

And then Thorpe groaned once or twice, because his head was stuffed with cotton, and his mouth felt like a brewery. No matter how much beer he'd drunk, he hadn't been able to forget what had happened at the party. In his mind's eye, Perry Thorpe saw the fat little saxophone player, his cheeks puffing as he blew—and everybody rocking to his hoarse melodies. Gradually the scene faded, and probably Perry Thorpe fell asleep not long afterward. . . .

When he found himself awake again, it was with a start. He was sitting up in bed, his hands holding his temples, and his mind flooded with music. He could still hear those miraculous notes; the magnificent melody that had spun itself into being while he slept. He could almost hear it still, wave after wave of the purest music, running on and on, gathering beauty and substance as it went, until it rose in his memory as the loveliest solo for the flute he had ever heard.



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For it *had* been a flute. There was no mistake about that. The flute he remembered — almost remembered, hearing, had been played by a master, though he could think of no one he had ever heard who had played with such depth and such ease. And the melody? The brain-child of a drunken musician, too far gone even to get out of bed and try to put some of the notes down. He felt he was going to cry.

All this happened in an instant, and the instant after that, someone was thumping on the wall from the next room, and a high-pitched feminine voice called, "Cut it out, you wild man!"

"Huh?" said Perry Thorpe, quietly. He felt quite numb, and after puzzling a moment, fell back again to sleep.

BUT sleep was impossible. He had no idea how long he had dozed this time before he opened his eyes again in the darkness, but the silvery flute had returned, and the evanescent music seemed still to be hanging in the air. And this time, in addition to the thumping on the wall, there was someone at the door.

"Ah, shut up!" he called, gathering himself out of bed and going to the door. "What do you want?" he mumbled sleepily to the man who stood there in a dressing gown.

"Listen, Thorpe," said the man. "Do I have to remind you I'm a member of the police force before you quiet down? Ain't it enough you play that damn thing night and day without you starting to blow your brains out on a Saturday night at 3 A.M.?"

Perry Thorpe stood there, rocking on his feet, looking at the huge man. "Who, me?" he groaned. The music was still in his mind.

"Don't mean your uncle. Now cut out that piccolo playing or I'll run you in the can. You must be drunk." The man advanced a step and took a deep breath. "You *are* drunk," he announced, almost officially. "Now go back to—"

"It isn't a piccolo," said Thorpe. "It's a flute. It's—"

"I don't care if it's a trained seal. Stop that confounded noise or—"

"Noise?" said Thorpe, a trifle less sleepy. "You call that wonderful music. . . ." Suddenly, Thorpe was wide awake. "Did *you* hear it too?" he cried.

"Look at the man, will you?" the policeman said to an imaginary witness. "Listen, Thorpe, not only did *I* hear it, but I expect letters from my relatives in Brooklyn about it. What the hell do you think got me up at this ungodly hour?"

"Wasn't it the most wonderful thing you've ever heard?" cried Thorpe. "Wasn't it almost as if something from another world had come down to play for us?"

"I wasn't in the mood to appreciate it," came the dour answer. "I had a tough day at the station house. Now stop it."

"But *I* wasn't playing."

The man in the dressing gown took a deep breath and backed away. "All right," he said. "All right. I warned you." And he turned and disappeared down the stairs.

Thorpe returned to bed, where he lay awake. If only he had been playing that flute. . . . What flute? The flute he had heard in his sleep? How could Officer Flaherty have heard a flute in Perry Thorpe's mind? And not only Flaherty, but that girl next door with the off-key voice?

Plainly, the whole business was fantastic. Perry Thorpe was not drunk enough to stop him from realizing that he *was* drunk, nevertheless, and on this he at once blamed everything.

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But there was a sneaking little thought coming back to him, a horrible doubting thought, and as it lingered, he found sleep still impossible. There was only one thing to do. He lay back in bed, quietly. Then, after a while, he began breathing deeply and regularly, as if he were indeed asleep . . .

THEN it came. *La-la-la-la-li!* A tender, high-pitched run on a flute! He was out of bed like a tiger, bounding noiselessly in one great, careless leap that carried him right to the silver flute on the desk. But with his first movement, the flute had gone silent!

What flute? *His* flute? But-but. . . . No, it was lying there, inanimate, silent, the flute he had always known.

Holding his head between his hands, Thorpe went back to bed. He was no sooner under the covers than the flute —there was no doubt about *which* flute —let go with a *dolce la-li-li-la* and then abruptly swung into a wild, melodious song not unlike that of an inspired shepherd.

"Oh-h-h, my Lord!" Thorpe yelled, jumping up and standing in bed, his eyes wide and his mouth wider. "Help!" he yelled again.

And the flute kept playing, growing louder, then softer, playing breathless snatches of music of a romantic nature. It kept playing right through the pounding on the wall, which commenced immediately; through the hammering on the floor, which was Officer Flaherty from the apartment below; through the thudding on the ceiling, which was a vague somebody upstairs.

How that flute could play! Stones would have melted. The river should have stopped in its course. Humans should have been transfixed. And Perry Thorpe was transfixed—more than that —he was paralyzed. He stood in bed, an astonished, frightened young man . . . and yet somehow enthralled, spellbound.

But he was the only one. On four sides the hammering was like thunder. The walls, the floor, the ceiling shook. The room was a great drum that a dozen different people were pounding.

As if the flute could sense the conflicting feelings that came together in that room, it changed its tune suddenly and from its silvery depths a fierce, anguished melody poured, a song whose low notes pierced Perry Thorpe's brain and whose high notes rattled the window panes.

Louder and louder the hammering grew, and wilder the flute played, in harmony with everyone—with the pounding of heavy feet on the stairs as they came closer, matching blow for blow of the man at the door, mingling with the angry cries that came on all sides.

Louder and higher than all of them, Thorpe's voice roared out: "Stop it! Stop it!" There were tears in his eyes. He had never heard such—but the people—Flaherty—the police! "STOP!"

But the flute didn't stop. The door was groaning with a weight pressing against it; in a moment it would be forced. Dragging himself, hardly able to move, his eyes never leaving the flute as it lay on the desk, outlined by the light that came from the moon outside, Thorpe went to the door. Wilder and wilder the flute played, until all the world had become something for the magic of its music to play with.

In that unequalled moment, Thorpe opened the door—and the flute stopped an instant before the door opened!

"Thorpe!" Flaherty shouted. "I'll —" and he stopped.

THERE were half a dozen angry people in various forms of undress standing in the hall, and Perry Thorpe

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stood before them, his shoulders moving, his face glistening in the hall-light, crying unashamedly.

"What's the matter?" said Flaherty, at once bewildered and softened. "Speak up, lad, what's wrong?"

A full half-minute passed before Thorpe could say a word. Presently he sobbed, "The flute . . . it's playing by itself."

Several soft gasps sounded, and a gathered murmur swept down the hall. "What did you say?" said Flaherty.

But Thorpe couldn't speak again. The tears were falling noiselessly down his face, and he motioned them to come in with him. Silently, the people in the hall entered the room, followed Thorpe in the darkness to the flute as it lay in its little pool of moonlight on the desk.

"It . . . played by itself," Thorpe managed to say. "Didn't you notice how it stopped just when I opened the door? How could I have been playing it? I wouldn't have had time to get it back to the desk."

A thin, hawk-faced woman in a pea-green robe brought a hand up to her mouth and stifled a cry. "That's so," said a man, slowly. "What he says is true."

As if their gaze was compelled, every eye slowly gravitated to the flute now. It was a delicate, silver instrument. It seemed sleek, almost debonair, its lines exquisitely fashioned, a retiring yet charming thing. In the silence, Officer Flaherty reached out a hand, gingerly, and brought the flute to his mouth. He blew—and a horrible, rasping sound came out.

Flaherty almost dropped the flute, and the compelling instant, the wraith-like quality of that suspended moment, burst. With the surprising simultaneity that accompanied all their actions, a new reaction took place. The world of the commonplace returned.

"What are you crying about?" Flaherty demanded.

"The music," said Thorpe, beginning to cry again. "I can't stand it. It's too beautiful."

Only Flaherty's hands moved; they twiched and shook. His voice came unsteadily, as if with great effort. "Listen," he said, "I ain't been a cop for fifteen years for nothing. I don't know what you got rigged up here, or how you managed that trick. All I got to say is if I hear another peep out of that piccolo, I'll—I'll—you crack-brained . . ." And here Flaherty's face blew up so full that further speech was impossible. He turned abruptly and forged through the others, who followed him without a word.

Alone with the flute, Perry Thorpe sat down near the desk, scarcely breathing. He couldn't take his eyes off the flute. He was waiting. . . .

The sounds of doors slamming echoed through the house. The voices died away and silence and rest came again to the outraged house.

Then, quietly: *li-li-li.*

"Don't!" said Perry Thorpe, trembling.

Li-li-la! came from the flute, still quietly, as if in dialogue. And without waiting: *li-la-li-li-li-i-i* . . . until it died away mournfully. It was playing with him!

"If you don't stop—" Thorpe began. To no avail. Suddenly the flute sang out sweetly, loudly, in a run of notes like a torrent.

THERE was no stopping it. Like something utterly wicked and unbelievable the flute was rousing the house again! Without a moment's hesitation, Thorpe opened the window and flung the flute down into the backyard two flights below, watching it gleam in

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the light as it fell—and still playing!

Still playing! *Still playing!* Now a great martial air filled the night, wailing and crying with blood lust, singing as if it was the gathered voice of the dead. Just before the windows of the neighborhood began opening, Thorpe could hear the echoes of the flute rebounding from the walls of a hundred houses, running down the street in a piercing series of notes. And then the furious, uncomprehending shouts of the neighbors rose higher and higher, yet never above the flute, until complete bedlam had come.

Now again, Perry Thorpe turned aghast, watching the walls shake as his neighbors pounded away on the door.

"Stop it! Stop it! You crazy loon—"

"Open that door before—"

"You drunken—"

"Stop that flute!"

Perry Thorpe's eyes were popping as he leaned far out of the window, looking down into the courtyard below. His whole body trembled, and the perspiration ran down his face in sheer rivers. "Oh, Lord, oh . . ." he kept whispering. . . .

For the flute, playing by itself down in the courtyard, *Sounded as if it were still in Thorpe's room!*

Yet . . . the music was more magnificent than it had been all that melancholy, insane night, and Thorpe, screaming at odd moments to the flute below to stop, would now and again sit quietly and listen to the flute, trying to remember phrases, even humming along with it. And so intoxicated with the strange music of the silver flute did he become that it stopped mattering to him that the whole neighborhood had awakened and were screaming for the flute, and Thorpe—or so they supposed—to stop.

When the door was finally broken down, and the room overflowed with furious tenants and half a dozen policemen, among whom was Flaherty, Thorpe was beyond them. The music had finally taken him prisoner, and he sat calmly by the window, nodding his head and humming . . .

BUT beneath his tranquillity there was a little blaze of alarm. Part of it was due perhaps to the sounds of sirens that he had heard in the street, sounds that meant patrol wagons were coming; that hadn't meant much, because the flute was safely in the yard, where its music could not be attributed to him. But as the door had crashed open and the police spilled in, the flute suddenly stopped! For a moment, Thorpe chilled, then he was calm again.

An officer with a sergeant's stripes strode over to Thorpe, while the other policemen kept back the curious. "Hey," he said loudly, "what's the matter with you? Gone nuts?"

"I'm not sure," said Thorpe, idly. "Now what would you say if I told you my flute was playing by itself—that I'd thrown it out the window half an hour ago?"

The sergeant turned to two of his men. "All right, boys, into the wagon with him."

Perry Thorpe rose before the police got to him, anxiety and anger rising with him. "Listen, Sergeant," he exclaimed, "why don't you investigate? I don't care how nutty it sounds: I say that flute is in the courtyard and it plays by itself."

"Sure, sure," said the sergeant. "I ain't takin' you in for playin' that one. It's the little one that I'm interested in." And from the desk right beside Perry Thorpe he lifted a flute—the silver flute that Thorpe knew so well!

For an instant, as Thorpe looked at the flute he had thrown out the window,

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the world spun slowly beneath his gaze; the walls that had taken the pounding on all sides seemed suddenly tired and were melting, like huge blobs of taffy; and even the police were huge blue shadows. And through that world where nothing was anything, Thorpe saw the little silver flute, trim and silent, lying before him in the sergeant's hands.

Then Thorpe burst out with a cry. "I threw it out! I didn't play it! I haven't played it all night! It's been—"

"Watch him, boys," said the sergeant, turning away. "Maybe he's just a little stinko on beer, like Flaherty says, and maybe he's off. I heard about cases like this before. Somethin' about these musicians. . . ."

Thorpe was struggling with the police then, yelling incoherently, though through his yelling he could still hear the lovely music of the flute, and the next minute he was humming the last melody, humming at the top of his voice.

"Take that damn piccolo along," Flaherty shouted. "It's evidence."

"It isn't a piccolo!" Thorpe shouted as the police, forming a cordon around him, were wrapping him in his overcoat, pulling on his trousers and shoes. "It's a flute! *La-la-li-li!*" His voice grew louder as he hummed.

"Got the flute?" the sergeant shouted. "All right—one side, everybody—let's go!" Pushing through the mass of people in the hall, half-carrying Thorpe, the police rushed down the stairs and out into the street, where it seemed half the city had gathered to watch Perry Thorpe marched into the wagon. A spontaneous yell greeted him, amid angry shouts of condemnation. For a moment Perry Thorpe knew the thrill of brief notoriety, and then he was crying again, protesting his innocence, shouting that he hadn't played the flute, and again the tears were coursing down his face as the police marched him straight to the wagon.

BUT his protestations brought a new note into the mob's voice. Hearing the hysterical denials made them pause a moment, either in their anger or amusement, and take this new element under consideration. What the outcome might have been is problematical, because half a dozen policemen are a fine half-dozen anywhere, yet a mob this size, fully aroused—well, it never came to that.

For, as Perry Thorpe climbed the first step up the wagon behind the policeman with the flute, he stumbled, and in stumbling his head came down to where his mouth might conceivably have touched the mouthpiece of the flute. It didn't, as it happens, touch the flute at all—it merely looked that way—but instantaneously the flute went off in a brilliant run of *li-li-la-la* that pierced the ears.

The policeman snatched at the flute and the music stopped, and the crowd let out a roar of laughter. "What a sense of humor!" a fat man shouted, and the crowd echoed him.

Thorpe dived for the doorway to the wagon. "But I didn't play it!" he yelled. The laughter almost swept him off his feet with the wind it raised. Even the police were laughing.

"Bravo!" a voice shouted.

"A genius!" said another.

"He's nuts!" said a third.

"But a genius!" the second shouted again.

And so, with Perry Thorpe crying in bewilderment, and the mob waving and shouting goodbyes, the sirens of the cavalcade started up, the motors coughed, and through a thoroughly awakened area of the city, the party started for precinct headquarters, rac-

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ing through the darkened streets just as the dawn hinted its arrival . . .

THE ceremonies at the desk were short. The officer there made a brief entry in his ledger. The story of the flute hardly intrigued him. He scratched himself on his neck and mumbled, "So you got a piccolo that plays by itself, huh?" His eyes wandered back to the deck of cards arranged on the desk before him, forming a half-finished game of solitaire. Then he looked up with a start. "That's a new one on me," he sighed. "All right, boys, throw him in the can until the fuzz wears off his tongue."

"But my flute—" Thorpe began.

The officer put down a three of spades. "I'll put it in me own desk under your very eyes," he said, wearily. He turned to the Sergeant. "I been trying to win a game since ten o'clock," he said, a wave of emotion surging under his words. "Get that guy away from here."

Three policemen accompanied Perry Thorpe to a dank little cell at the end of a row. One of them, a fat, short man, bent over and whispered, "Listen, buddy, you mind telling me where you bought that beer?"

Thorpe shook his head. "Forgot," he muttered.

The policeman nodded, as if he had been expecting the answer. "Ain't it always the same?" he groaned. "The guys that need it never know where to find it."

Thorpe sat down solidly on the hard bed that hung by two chains from the wall. His head was buzzing again as he tried to review what had happened to him. The flute—he had had it for three years. He had bought it from a department store, paid cash. At least if he had gotten it in a queer little pawnshop, from a bent little man, whose shop had subsequently vanished—all right. He might have expected what had happened. But why . . . why should . . .

What was that?

A great shudder swept Perry Thorpe. He had imagined hearing the flute again, here in the safety of his cell. Thankfully, he remembered that the officer at the desk had locked it up.

La-la-la, it began, then played a sweet ending run. Thorpe was standing on the bed. "Hey!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "It's playing again. Hear it? It's playing again and you've got it in your desk!"

INSTANTLY there was a chorus of shouts from the adjoining cells as the whole two rows angrily came to life. A face in the cell next to Thorpe's came dangerously close to him and the lips on it said, "Stop that fire-engine before I push your gizzard down your throat."

"Who me?" Thorpe cried. "It's the flute in the desk!"

But suddenly it hit him that as he spoke—the music would stop—and it wouldn't begin again until he stopped speaking! That was what was happening now!

But then—what was that lying at his feet? That long, silver tube. Perry Thorpe knew what it was. The flute.

Down the far end of the cell block the gates were swinging open. The music of the flute was playing a melody Thorpe scarcely remembered.

Oh-h-h, I wish I had some-one to love me . . . The Prisoner's Song!

"Pipe down!" the desk officer was shouting.

"Let me at him, Sarge!" someone yelled. "I'll pipe him down!"

The desk Sergeant turned up all the lights amid a new roar of protests, and came puffing down the block, two officers behind him. "Damn you!" he bellowed, "don't you know when to stop

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rehearsing? Give me that other piccolo!"

Thorpe was sitting with his feet curled under him, like a Turk. Quietly, he lifted a sad face to the officer. "It's a flute," he observed. "And it isn't here any more."

"Throw him out!" a voice howled. "Keep them drunks out of here! This place is for criminals!"

The desk Sergeant turned, momentarily shaken from his purpose. "I suppose you'll be moving in the morning?" he shouted. Then he was back, glaring at Thorpe. "What'd *you* say?" he said. "Oh, yes!" He remembered. "So it's a flute, is it? Well, give it here before I make you eat it."

"Eat it!" the same voice as before howled. "It's the only square meal you'll ever get in this place!"

"Sh-a-a-a-ad-d-a-a-ppppp!" the Sergeant roared, his neck swelling until the cords stood out. "What the hell do you think this?"

"Amateur night," said a small voice nearby.

The Sergeant stumbled forward and gripped the cell bars. "Pete," he said, hoarsely, "get this guy and that piccolo out of here and in the office before I lose my mind."

Standing before the desk some moments later, Thorpe said, "These officers examined my cell after I left and they'll tell you there's no flute hidden there. Now maybe someone will listen to me."

The desk officer had his head buried in his arms. He slowly peeped out from underneath. "Search him, Pete," he muttered.

"I have, sir," said the taller of the two policemen. "He's got nothing except a breath like the morning dew."

The Sergeant sat up. He opened his desk drawer and pulled out the flute, laying it gingerly on the desk.

Perry Thorpe opened his mouth to speak—and his mouth froze that way—because the instant his lips parted the flute went off! *Li-li-li-la-a-a!* It seemed to be coming from his mouth!

"OHHHH!" the Sergeant cried out as if he had been stabbed. *"He can whistle like a piccolo!"*

Thorpe snapped his lips shut with an effort that brought perspiration to his forehead. "The flute . . ." he gulped. "I swear—"

THE officer named Pete put a hand down over Perry Thorpe's mouth, and an instant afterward a full burst of high notes seemed to pour past the officer's hand, filling the room with shrieking music, but undoubtedly flute music. The howls from the cell block floated in. The officer quickly took his hand away from Thorpe's mouth.

"Listen to me," Thorpe burst out. "I can't make a sound like a flute! Nobody can! It just looks that way because it happens that every time I stop speaking, the flute takes the opportunity to sound off and make it appear as if I'm making the music, and that's what happened before and that's what's happening now, and that's what's going to keep happening, but I don't know why and I'm telling you that there's no way out of it—"

"Shut up a minute!" the Sergeant bellowed.

"—unless you believe me and watch—if I stop talking the music'll begin again," Thorpe said, rattling away, "and I don't want that to happen so I'm going to keep talking that flute out of playing if I have to talk all night, and I don't mind talking all night because I'd rather talk all night than have that flute play and have people think I'm either playing it or imitating it, and instead of that I'm going—"

The Sergeant had climbed up on his

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chair, and he was standing there now, holding his head in his hands. "Sh-a-a-ad-d-a-a-ppp!" he yelled. "Stop that confounded talking! I can't hear meself think!"

"—to keep right on with any old kind of—" Thorpe was saying, "oh-no, not unless you take the full responsibility if that flute plays again, and on the other hand I'm perfectly contented to just keep on talking, keep on talking, any old words that—"

The Sergeant jumped up atop the desk. "Stop!" he almost screamed. "I'll take the full responsibility!"

Abruptly, Perry Thorpe stopped speaking.

And there was silence, wonderful silence. The three policemen and Perry Thorpe stood there looking at each other, drinking the quiet in. The Sergeant got down off the desk to the chair, then down on the floor.

The Sergeant sighed. "All right," he said, brokenly. "You got me to do what you wanted. I took the responsibility for you imitating that piccolo."

"But I didn't imitate anything," said Thorpe.

The Sergeant looked at him in the quiet. "Just like you didn't play it when you had it in your room?"

"Right. The flute was in my cell when you came."

"Oh," said the Sergeant. "Then I was mistaken when I thought I took it out of me desk a couple of minutes ago?"

"No. It got back there somehow. Just like it got to my room after I threw it down into the alley."

"Ummmmm," said the Sergeant. "So you don't admit anything?" Perry Thorne shook his head. "So you call this blessed silence we're having now nothing more than a mere accident, or, you might say, a whim of that confounded piccolo?" Thorpe nodded and was about to speak, but the Sergeant said, "All right, I know—it's a flute. Now stand back and let me gather me brains together."

THE Sergeant let his eyes linger over the cards on his desk. There were footprints over them from where he had been standing on them. He looked again at Thorpe. "So you think maybe that piccolo is going to go off again soon?" he asked, quietly.

"I can't say. It might." Thorpe couldn't take his eyes off the flute.

"Well," said the Sergeant. He leaned forward heavily until his face hung over the opposite side of his desk and he looked directly at Thorpe. "Pete, give me that ring of keys. Now then, you," he addressed Perry Thorpe, "d'you see this ring of keys? There's one for each cell in there, and in each one of those cells there is a man whose one aim in life now is to get a pair of hands around your windpipe, which is doing a jig in the Adam's apple this minute."

The Sergeant fell back and picked up the flute. He held it out at arm's length. "Here, take it back to your cell with you. I don't want to argue about imitations when they hold the inquest."

"What inquest?" said Perry Thorpe.

"Yours," said the Sergeant, amicably. "You're going back into that cell of yours, with that piccolo. Then—the first sound I hear, I am going to throw this ring of keys into the nearest cell."

"But they'll open their cells . . ." Thorpe faltered.

"Right."

". . . and they'll come after me. . . ."

"Ummm-hmmmm."

". . . they'll kill me!"

"Exactly!" said the Sergeant. "That's what I mean by mentioning an inquest. So the idea is to keep the piccolo quiet, and to keep yourself from

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doing imitations." His face grew dark. "Because in spite of what you hear, we are *not* running an amateur night here!"

Perry Thorpe almost fainted. He held up his hands in a plea. "You don't know what you're doing," he moaned. "You're sending an innocent man to his doom. I have absolutely no control over this flute, no matter whether I have it with me or not. Please, Sergeant, listen to me. . . ."

"Not so good," said the Sergeant, dryly. "Outside of being able to perspire when you want to, you're a ham. My last bit of advice for you is to stick to imitations. Take him away, boys."

One of the officers thrust the flute into Thorpe's clammy hands, and the other began to push him forward. A low, anticipatory murmur, the combination of a dozen snarls, greeted Perry Thorpe as he was ushered back to his cell at the end of the block.

The officer named Pete bent to Thorpe and whispered, "Don't they sound like mad wolves?" Thorpe didn't answer. He couldn't answer. From the waist up, he was like a man already dead. His eyes were glassy, his arms rigid, one hand stiffly holding the flute, and even his breathing became imperceptible. Only his legs were alive—and his ears. He was straining his hearing, waiting for the flute to make the first sound that would mean. . . .

THE cell door clanged shut behind him. Slowly he sat down on the edge of the bed, holding the flute in both hands and looking at it as if it was a stick of dynamite. The sweat ran down his face in swollen streams. From the fingertips which held the flute, little shocks of electricity moved up, overheating the rest of his body.

Then, ever so faintly, the first sound came, a *li-li-li* like the distant tinkling of fairy bells. Thorpe groaned quietly. "Please," he begged, "please be quiet." But the sound came again, not loud enough to be heard five feet away, but louder than the first time.

"Hey!" a voice nearby shouted. "He's talking to himself! He's loco!"

Answering shouts came from all sides, but Thorpe didn't hear them. He peered down the end of the cell corridor and saw the Sergeant standing on the other side of the bars, and the ring of keys in his hand was swinging. But even the ominous sound of the keys was lost on Perry Thorpe. For the flute was at it again, and it was getting louder, almost loud enough now to pass out of his cell.

Thorpe was clutching the flute now, his eyes closed. "Please," he whispered, "did I make you angry before? Is that it? Was it the nasty things I said to you earlier tonight? I didn't mean them I didn't mean a single syllable of it!"

Was he imagining it, or was the flute growing softer?

"You're the most wonderful flute in the world! You're the only flute I've ever had. You mean more to me than anything else. I wouldn't hurt you for the world. I ought to cut my tongue out for the things I said—"

There was a sharp, clicking sound then, as if something had snapped, and the sound startled Perry Thorpe into opening his eyes. Then he saw the Sergeant standing right outside his cell, flanked by the other two officers.

"Holy smoke!" said the Sergeant, huskily. "What a drunk! What a drunk!" He was holding his head in his hands and he was rocking. The fat little policeman sighed heavily. Pete, the tall one, was just staring. Then they turned around and left, their feet shuffling down the corridor.

Thorpe heard them go. The flute

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was completely silent now. Thorpe laid it down beside him and closed his eyes again . . .

WHEN morning came and the first rays of the sun ran across the cell floor and hit Perry Thorpe in the eyes, he started up like a shot. Instinctively he grabbed the flute that was lying beside him still. "Sh-h-h," he whispered. "Be quiet!"

Then he looked around and saw the cell and he remembered, or thought he did, the roll-call of fantastic events of the night before. Perry Thorpe groaned a mighty groan. His still sleepy eyes couldn't believe what he saw, and the dull ache in his skull was no help.

"Rise and shine, lad. Rise and shine!" There was a smiling policeman outside the cell door, working the lock. "The new desk Sergeant is achin' to meet you."

When Thorpe stood before the new Sergeant, that officer, a dry-faced man whose face cracked when he smiled, said: "Sergeant Muldoon left at eight o'clock, young man, an' he told me a story that's past believin'. How do you feel this mornin'?"

Perry Thorpe swayed a little, mumbled, "Lousy." He was staring at the flute and grinning. As he remembered more and more what had happened the previous night, he grinned the more.

"You were powerful drunk last night," said the Sergeant.

"*Was I?*" Thorpe agreed. "Man, I could swear it had all happened—That it might happen again in a minute."

The Sergeant smiled slowly. "I know how 'tis," he said. "Many's the morn I've opened me eyes to see the same green animals as I had taken home the night before. You've a powerful imagination, lad, an' one which I'd say needed no drinking to stimulate it. If you'll take my advice—"

Thorpe straightened up. "Thanks. I've had a terrible lesson," he said. "Sure, I know now I imagined the whole thing."

"O' course you did!" The Sergeant came off the bench, taking Thorpe's arm. "Here, now, stop that shiverin'. That's better." He made an entry in the large ledger that lay opened on the desk. "I've checked you out of the police hotel, now, an' you'll be a better man for the experience. Now you go home and get some rest."

Perry Thorpe shook hands with the officer and started out of the building.

As he walked slowly down the corridor, he tried to arrange his thoughts. He had never been so drunk before, he knew that. But the intensity of those imagined events. And the way the flute had actually stopped its playing—what the hell was he thinking about? The flute playing *itself?* Nonsense! Sheer, stupid nonsense—the kind one could expect from a drunk.

But then—the flute—*if it had* played by itself—had started after he had insulted it, and it had stopped after . . . after what? After he had begged it to stop and had said he was sorry.

In its own insane pattern, that made sense of a sort. But the answer was clearly that it had all been in his mind. The explanations of the police, and the racking pain in his head, were enough testimony to that.

But just then, as he walked ahead toward the exit—*la-la-la-li-li-li!*

PERRY THORPE jumped a foot off the floor, holding the flute as far away as he could. His ears were alive with the pain of hearing the sound of the flute—and it had sounded as if it came from an open door that he had just passed. It was—

"Hey—you!"

Thorpe spun around. There was a

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burly policeman standing in his shirt-sleeves, standing in the doorway he had just passed. In his hands he held a flute. "Hey!" he said, coming toward Thorpe, "you the guy that was in the can all night?"

"Yes," said Thorpe, his voice quavering. "Did you just play a run on that flute?"

"Sure." The policeman looked at Thorpe a moment, then began to laugh. "My oh my," he roared. "Did you think it was *your* flute playing again—the way you kept telling old Muldoon last night?"

Perry Thorpe stood undecided, then joined in the laughter. "Boy, was I drunk!" he grinned. The whole thing was clearer now. This was the world of sanity again; when a flute played, someone was playing it.

"Let me have a look at that flute," said the officer, taking it out of Thorpe's hands. "I play on the police band here," he said. "We're going to have a rehearsal in about ten minutes. Parade today."

He turned the flute admiringly. "Good-looking, isn't it?" he offered. "Mind if I blow a note or two on it?"

Thorpe nodded and the policeman put the flute to his lips. He blew, and a sound like wind blowing through a broken bottle came out. "Holly Hannah!" said the policeman in alarm. "The reed's busted clean through!"

"Huh?" said Thorpe, looking at the flute. Suddenly he remembered hearing a sharp click the night before—a click which might have been the reed as it split, and which would—

"Can't play now," said the policeman. "Why, the reed's the heart of a good flute. The dampness in the cell must have broken it. When you've broken that, you've broken the heart of the instrument."

"Oh my God," Perry Thorpe muttered. He felt faint and a fear grew in him. He had broken the heart of the flute. When had that click come? When he had said: "you're the most wonderful flute in . . . I wouldn't hurt you for . . . I ought to cut my tongue out. . . ." All the things he had said in that last perilous moment when the flute had begun to get louder again in his cell, when the Sergeant was waiting to throw the keys . . .

Broken the heart of the flute. In its insane way, that too made sense! Was that why the flute hadn't played afterwards? Was the answer to the seeming delirium that had taken him? The cell damp—yes. But what he had said. . . ?

"Anything wrong?" said the policeman. "You look sick."

"No," said Thorpe, taking the flute. "I'm all right. Just a hangover. Had a little too much last night." He began walking toward the door again.

He had had too much the night before. He knew that. But the rest . . . If the cell damp had broken the reed, if anything else had really been the drink . . .

Perry Thorpe came out into the sunshine. He would never really know the answer. This was a rational world. This was a world that made sense. But one thing more Perry Thorpe knew. He would never say another unkind word to that flute as long as he lived. Not that he really believed the nonsense of the broken heart, or the playing on its own . . . not at all.

"But," he said aloud, to himself, "just in case."

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 79)

"The Mark III is a more versatile device than you suspect." Jorlemagne looked grave. "Now—the next problem is to deduce where he's taken her."

"That way," O'Leary said, closing his eyes and pointing. "About ten and a half miles."

"Eh? How do you know, my boy?"

"It's just a little trick I picked up from Tazlo Haz. Now let's call out the guard and—"

"A crowd of locals would merely complicate matters," Jorlemagne cut in. "You and I, lad—we'll have to tackle him alone."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

At the door the sage paused, motioned with his left forefinger; at once, the clamor in the room broke out in full force.

"Magic?" Lafayette gulped.

"Don't be silly," Jorlemagne snorted. "Microhypnotics, nothing more."

"So that's why you were always playing with your fingers—I mean Lom's fingers."

"Quelius' fingers, to be precise. He's a clever man, but he lacks the necessary digital dexterity for microhypnotic manipulation. Pity. It would have saved a spot of bother."

"Well, we still have a spot of bother ahead. It's a hard half hour's ride, and we're wasting time."

The stable attendants stumbled over each other to accommodate them; five minutes later, mounted on stout Arab stallions, they cantered out through the gates, galloped full tilt through the echoing street, and out along the dark road to the north.

4

THE PEAK LOOMED like a giant shard of black glass into the night sky.

"High Tor, it's called," O'Leary said. "They're up there—I'm sure of it. But why there?"

"The entire formation is riddled with passages," Jorlemagne said, as the horses, winded by the run, picked their way up the slope of rubble that led to the base of the mesa. "It's a natural volcanic core, left standing after the cone weathered away. Quelius spent considerable time and effort tunneling it out, under the pretext that it was to be an undercover observation station. I'll wager the Distorter gear is installed somewhere inside it. And he won't waste any time setting it in full operation, if I know Quelius—and I do."

"Well—produce one of those gadgets of yours," O'Leary urged impatiently. "I want to feel that stringy neck in my hands!"

"It's not to be quite so simple as that, my lad. My pockets are empty, I fear."

"Climbing that would be like going up the side of an apartment house," O'Leary said as he stared up at the vertical wall rising before him. He dismounted, scanned the rockface, picked a spot, hoisted himself up a few feet—and came tumbling back as his grip slipped on the smooth stone.

"A human fly couldn't go up that," he said. "We should have brought the field artillery along, and blasted a hole through it!"

"Well—we didn't," Jorlemagne said. "And since we can't walk through solid walls, we'll have to think of

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something else . . ."

"Hey!" O'Leary said. "You may have given me an idea . . .!" He closed his eyes, willed his thoughts back to the moment in Thallathlone when he had stood in the sealed chamber hollowed from the giant tree, abandoned there to merge—or die. He remembered the smell of the waxed, resinous wood, the sensation as he had stepped forward, pressed against and *through* the iron-hard wood . . .

It was like wading through dense fog; a fog so thick as to drag at him as he pressed forward. He felt it touch his skin, interpenetrating, swirling about his interior arrangements—and then the breaking-bubble sensation as he emerged on the far side . . .

He opened his eyes. He was standing in a low, stone-walled passage before a flight of rudely chipped stone steps.

5

"IT'S TOO BAD about you, young woman," the cracked old voice was saying as Lafayette crept up the last few steps and poked his head over the threshold to the circular room, which, to judge from the ache in O'Leary's knees, occupied the topmost level of the Tor. Across the small chamber, Daphne, looking more beautiful than ever with a lock of black hair over one eye and three buttons missing from her jacket was tugging at the handcuffs that secured her to a massive oak chair. Quelius stood looking down at her with an expression of mild reproof.

"You've caused me no end of trouble, you know—first by behaving in a most unwifely manner in refusing to espouse my regency, then by running off like a little fool, and now by saddling me with your person. Still, you'll make a useful hostage, once I've completed certain arrangements against interference."

"I never saw you before, you nasty little man," she said cooly.

"Tsk. What a pity you don't appreciate the true symmetry of the situation. As O'Leary, I paved the way for the deposition of your little featherweight princess and her lout of a consort, while at the same time destroying O'Leary's popularity with the mob—and simultaneously, established a workable police apparatus with an adequate war chest. The stage is now set for me to step in and set matters aright."

"When Lafayette catches you," Daphne said defiantly, "he'll fold you double and throw you away."

"Aha! But that's just it, my child. Lafayette will never catch me! At this moment the poor imbecile is no doubt suffering the penalty for *my* outrageous behavior!"

"Wrong!" O'Leary yelled, and launched himself at Quelius. The little old man whirled with astonishing agility, bounded to the wall, and jerked a rope dangling from above. Too late Lafayette saw the entire section of the floor before him drop like a hangman's trap. He made a wild clutch, missed, went over the edge and fell ten feet into a net that snapped shut around him like a closing fist.

6

QUELIUS lounged on the landing, smiling cheerfully at Lafayette, suspended in the open stairwell with

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his head in fetal position between his knees:

"And you were going to fold *me* double," the old fellow said good humoredly. "Or so your bride predicted. Ah, well, we must excuse the ladies their predictable misconceptions, eh?"

"You're not going to get away with this, Quelius," Lafayette said as clearly as he could with a mouthful of kneecap. "Jorlemagne will slice you into pastrami—"

"Permit me to contradict you, Mr. O'Leary. Jorlemagne will do nothing. I'm quite immune to his digital trickery—and although he is indeed a clever chap, I happen to be in possession of the contents of his laboratory—so you see—I hold not merely the aces, but the entire deck."

"I noticed you left the ballroom in something of a hurry," O'Leary countered. "I suppose being in your burrow makes you feel brave. But I got inside without much trouble, you notice."

"So you did," Quelius nodded imperturbably. "My instruments indicate that you employed a rather interesting molecular polarization technique to pull off the trick. I invite you to use the same method to extricate yourself from your present situation." He cackled merrily. "You've been a sore trial to me, O'Leary. Bad stroke of luck, encountering Hymie the Ferocious, I believe he called himself, when I stepped outside the tavern that night. My, I'll warrant the red-headed ruffian whose shape I was using had skinned knuckles when he came to himself. But for that interruption you'd have been safely tucked away in the palace brig, ready to assist me in my impersonation. But then, all's well that ends well."

"Why go to so much trouble to strand yourself in a backward Locus like Artesia?" Lafayette inquired.

"Just making conversation, O'Leary? But I may as well oblige you; the Distorter won't be up to full charge for another half hour or so. Why Artesia, you ask? Well, I find it ideally suited to my purposes. Too backward to possess adequate techniques of self-defense, but sufficiently advanced to offer the industrial base I require to construct the masterwork of my career."

"So what? Nobody here will be able to appreciate it—and you're cutting off all contact with Central, so no one there will ever know."

"Correction," Quelius beamed. He rubbed his hands together with a sound like sandblocks in a kindergarten orchestra. "I estimate it will require no more than a year to assemble a high-capacity Distorter capable of acting effectively, against the Probability gradient. My, won't the pompous officials of Central—those self-appointed monitors of continuum morality—be surprised when they discover that it's their own bureaucratic beehive that's cut off from all outside contact? And then, O'Leary—then I can set about rearranging matters in a manner more to my liking!"

"Quelius—you're nuts—did you know that?"

"Of course. That's quite all right. Better embarked on an exciting

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insanity than mouldering away in dull normality. One thing you can't deny: we psychotics lead interesting lives." Quelius dropped his bantering tone. "Now," he said briskly, "it's time to make disposition of you, Mr. O'Leary, and see to my equipment. Now, I could merely cut the rope and allow you to continue your interrupted descent—or I might lower you to a point six feet above the cellar floor and build a small fire to keep the chill off your bones. Any preference, Mr. O'Leary?"

"Sure. I'd prefer to die of old age."

"To be sure, so would we all—all but myself, of course. I'll have available to me an endless series of fresh young vessels to contain the vital essence of my personality. Possibly I'll begin with Mrs. O'Leary, eh? It might be quite a lark to be a female—until I tired of the game; but this isn't solving the problem of your brief future. Hmm. I may have an idea—if you'll excuse me a moment. Now don't go 'way." Quelius cackled and hurried off.

The stoutly woven net, of quarter-inch hemp, rotated slowly, affording O'Leary an ever-changing aspect of damp stone walls. Hanging head-down as he was, he had an equally clear view of the floor a hundred feet below. He imagined how it would feel when the knife-blade began sawing through the rope. First one strand would break, and the net would drop a few inches; then another—and another—and at last the final popping sound and the downward plunge—

"That kind of thinking won't help any, O'Leary," he told himself sternly. "Maybe Jorlemagne has a trick or two up his sleeve. Maybe a regiment of Royal Cavalry are riding to the rescue right now; maybe Daphne will free the cuffs and bean the old devil when he pokes his head in the room . . ."

"Maybe you'd like to take part in an experiment?" Quelius called as he came pattering back down the stairs. "Actually, it's wasteful to merely cast aside a valuable experimental animal—and as it happens, I have a new modification on one of Jorlemagne's little trinkets I'd like to put to trial. It will take a few moments to set things up, but please be patient."

By rolling his eyes, Lafayette could see the renegade Commissioner setting out an armload of equipment on the landing. There was a tripod, a spherical, green-painted object the size of a softball, wires, pipes, a heavy black box.

"Jorlemagne intended the device as an aide to medical examination," Quelius confided as he worked. "Gives the surgeons a superb view of one's insides, eh? It required only a slight shifting about of components to improve it, however. My version simply turns the subject inside out, with no nonsense. Liver and lights right there for handy inspection. Of course, there's a bit of difficulty when it comes to getting you put back in the original order afterwards, but after all, we can't expect the pilot model to be without bugs, eh?"

Lafayette closed his eyes. No point in spending his last moments listening to the raving of a madman when he could be remembering pleasant scenes of the past for the last time. He pictured Daphne's smiling face . . . but the vision of her chained

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to a chair rose to blot out the image. He thought of Adoranne and Alain—and pictured them humbled before Quelius as he lolled on his stolen throne flanked by his secret police. Jorlemagne's towering figure was there—shaking his head futilely. Luppo rose up, leering; Gizelle looked at him tearfully. Belarius stared at him accusingly; Agent Raunchini shook a fist at him, mouthing reproaches. The lean visage of Wizner Hiz was there, alight with triumph as he led his choral group in song . . .

Lafayette opened his eyes. Quelius was busily stringing wires.

"Won't be a moment, O'Leary. Don't be impatient," he called.

Lafayette cleared his throat, and started to sing:

"Out of the world
Away and beyond
Back through the veil
Quelius begone . . ."

"What's this? The oldster looked around in surprise. "Vocal renditions in the face of eternity? A notable display of pluck. Pity your bride will never know. I intend to tell her that you kicked and screamed, offered to trade her for your life, volunteered to cut her ears off and all that sort of thing. Most amusing to watch her attempting to keep a stiff upper lip."

"Afloat on a sea
Wider than night
Deeper and deeper
Sinking from sight,"

"Catchy tune," Quelius said. "Interesting rhythm. Seems to be a variation on the natural reality harmonic. Curious. Where did you learn it?"

Back where you came from,
Stealer of thrones
Back to the depths
Far under the stones . . ."

"You're annoying me, O'Leary," Quelius snapped. He had stopped work to glare at his captive. "Stop that caterwauling at once!"

"Out of the world,
Far from the sun
Begone from Artesia
Forever begone."

"Stop it at once, do you hear?" Quelius shrieked, covering his ears. "You're making me dizzy!" Suddenly he snatched up a knife from the heap of tools at his feet, leaned far out and slashed at the rope supporting the net.

"Borne on the wings
Of the magic song
From fair Artesia
Forever begone!"

There was a sharp *pop!* The rasping of the knife against the rope ceased abruptly. In the sudden silence, O'Leary thought he heard a faint, faraway cry, that trailed off into silence . . .

Footsteps rasped on the stone steps. O'Leary pried an eye open, saw Jorlemagne leaning out to pull the net in to the landing.

". . . found the entry . . . few minutes to discover trick . . . Quelius . . . where is he . . .?" the scientist's voice boomed and faded.

"Daphne—upstairs . . ." Lafayette managed; and then the darkness folded in like a black comforter.

7

LAFAYETTE awoke lying on his back

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in a narrow white bed. An anxious looking old fellow whom he recognized as the royal physician was hovering over him.

"Ah, awake at last, are we, sir? Now, just rest quietly—"

"Where's Daphne?" O'Leary sat up, threw off the covers.

"Sir Lafayette! I must insist! You've been unconscious for two days—"

"Nonsense! I've never felt better. Where is she?"

"Why—ah—as to that—Countess Daphne is in her apartments—in seclusion. She, er, doesn't wish to be disturbed—"

"Don't be silly, I don't want to disturb her." Lafayette leaped up, staggering only slightly, and grabbed up a robe from the chair beside the bed.

"But, Sir Lafayette, you can't—"

"Just watch me!"

Two minutes later, O'Leary rapped on Daphne's door.

"It's me, Lafayette!" he called. "Open up, Daphne!"

"Go away," came a muffled reply.

"Lafayette—what seems to be the trouble?" Jorlemagne called, arriving at a trot. "Dr. Ginsbag told me you'd leaped up and dashed off in a frenzy!"

"What's the matter with Daphne? She won't open the door!"

The old gentleman spread his hands. "Poor child, she's been through so much. I suggest you give her a few weeks to recover from the shock—"

"A few weeks! Are you out of your beany? I want to see her *now!*" He pounded on the door again. "Daphne! Open this door!"

"Go away, you imposter!"

"Imposter . . .?" Lafayette whirled to the startled sentries flanking the door. "All right, boys—break it down!"

As they hesitated, shuffling their feet and exchanging anxious glances, the door was flung open. Daphne stood there, dabbing at tear-reddened eyes. She jumped back as Lafayette reached for her.

"Leave me alone, you . . . you make-up artist," she wailed. "I knew you weren't really Lafayette the minute you threw the soup tureen at the Second cook!"

"Daphne—that was all a mistake! I wasn't me then, but I am now!"

"No, you're not—you're a stranger! And Lafayette is a horrid man with a gold ring in his ear and the whitest teeth, and the most immense black eyes, and . . ."

"That's Zorro, the crook!" O'Leary yelled. "I was him for awhile, while Quelius was me, but now I'm me again, and so is he!"

"I recognized him when he kissed me—"

"Almost kissed you," Lafayette corrected. "I stopped in time, remember?"

"I mean the next time. And then . . . and then he went away with that little dark-eyed creature with the knife—and he . . . he stole my gold bracelet before he left!"

"Daphne! What's been going on here? Don't tell me! Zorro is Zorro—and I'm me! Lafayette! Look at me! Don't you know me, Daphne?"

"My dear Countess," Jorlemagne started, "I assure you—"

"Stay out of this!" O'Leary yelled. "Daphne! Remember the fountain in

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the gardens where we used to sit and feed the goldfish? Remember the time you dropped the chamberpot on Alain's head? Remember the dress—the rose-colored silk one? Remember the time you saved me when I was falling off the roof?"

"If . . . if you're actually Lafayette," Daphne said, facing him, "When is my mother's birthday?"

"Your mother's birthday? Ah . . . let's see . . . uh . . . in October?"

"Wrong! What night are we supposed to play bridge with the duchess?"

"Er . . . Wednesday?"

"Wrong! When is our anniversary?"

"I know that one," Lafayette cried in relief. "The third of next month!"

"He's an imposter," Daphne wailed. "Lafayette never remembered our anniversary! She turned and fled into the room, threw herself face-down on the bed, weeping. Lafayette hurried after her.

"Don't touch me!" she cried as he bent over her.

"Oh, this is fine," O'Leary groaned. "Just perfect! Why did I have to do such a convincing job of selling you on my identity when I was Zorro?"

"It wasn't so much what he said," Daphne wept, "it was the way he made love that convinced me . . . and now he's gone . . ."

"Daphne! I keep telling you—you—what?" O'Leary's voice rose to a squeak. "Give me air!" he yelped, and plunged through the doors to the balcony—

And fell twenty feet into a rhododendron bush.

8

DAPHNE was sitting on the ground, cradling his head in her lap.

"Lafayette—is it really you . . .?"

"I . . . I've been telling you . . ."

"But it has to be. The false Lafayette was the one who ordered the balcony removed, when he tried to lock me in our apartments. *He* would have known it wasn't there. And besides—nobody but my very own Lafayette falls down quite the way you do!"

"Daphne," O'Leary murmurred, and drew her down to him . . .

"I just happened to think," Daphne said later. "If you were Zorro—just what was your relationship with that little brunette baggage named Gizelle?"

"*I* was wondering what *your* sleeping arrangements were—up until that four-flusher showed his true colors . . .?"

"But then," Daphne went on as if he hadn't spoken, "I decided there are some questions best left unasked."

—Keith Laumer

NOW ON SALE

In the January, 1971 *AMAZING STORIES*— The stunning conclusion of Bob Shaw's new novel, ONE MILLION TOMORROWS! *Plus* J.T. McIntosh's ALMOST HUMAN, Howard L. Myers' SOUL AFFRIGHTED, and Allen Rivers' THE VOLUNTEER!

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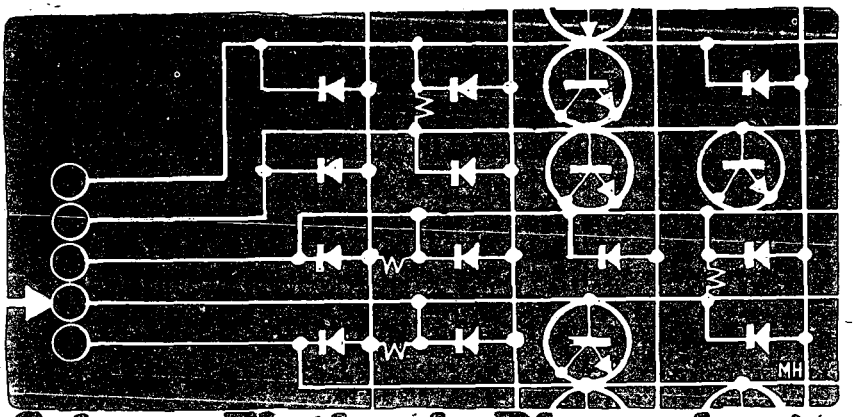

Science Fiction in Dimension

a critical column by ALEXEI PANSHIN

THE NATURE OF CREATIVE FANTASY

The term "science fiction" is used to mean two very different things which only rarely coincide. One is a kind of literature named—several times—by Hugo Gernsback, which he defined and claimed to publish: fiction about the science of the future. As Gernsback put it, "The object of *Amazing Stories* is to supply fiction, and the fiction is to be based on natural science, so that the person who reads *Amazing Stories* will not feel that he is wasting his time on imaginary adventures and episodes, but will realize that he is studying science, or perhaps imbibing science." It was the strength of this argument that persuaded Isaac Asimov's father to allow his son to read *Amazing Stories* in 1929.

The other referent is a body of literature that has accumulated around the term "science fiction" without any necessary relationship to Gernsback's definition. Include works that are called science fantasy, or New Wave, or books like *Brave New World* or *War With the Newts* or *Watch the Northwind Rise* that have drifted into science fiction's orbit. Include Stapledon and Wells. Include Edgar Rice Burroughs. It is the science fiction that Isaac Asimov actually found in the 1929 *Amazing Stories*. It is the science fiction of the title of this column.

One is a theory, the other a set of facts. Even before we had explored enough of the possibilities of the new lands of space and time to know their nature, Gernsback had declared that these imaginary settings were the province of fiction about science. Ever since, that portion of sf criticism that hasn't been dedicated to questions of literary technique has been devoted to the tedious and niggling adjustment of facts to theory, or sometimes lately, of theory to facts.

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When I began as a critic, I made my ritual obeisances to Hugo Gernsback. That is, I tried to reconcile what I read with some variant of Gernsback. When I realized that I couldn't do it, I checked to see if it had been done. I collected a number of definitions by Sam Moskowitz, Damon Knight, Kingsley Amis, Robert Heinlein and Reginald Bretnor, and all of them except Damon Knight's "It means what we point to when we say it," owe allegiance to Gernsback. Fact is subordinated to theory.

Here, for example, is Sam Moskowitz: "Science fiction is a branch of fantasy identifiable by the fact that it eases the 'willing suspension of disbelief' on the part of its readers by utilizing an atmosphere of scientific credibility for its imaginative speculations in physical science, space, time, social science, and philosophy." Gernsback couldn't have said it better.

We have our priorities backwards. It is the theory that should fit the facts, not the other way around.

The theory has never fit the facts.

The slogan of *Amazing Stories* was "Extravagent Fiction Today—Cold Fact Tomorrow." The slogan of *Science Wonder Stories*, the magazine Gernsback brought out in 1929 after he lost the ownership of *Amazing*, was "Prophetic Fiction is the Mother of Scientific Fact."

Amazing was "The Magazine of Scientifiction". Gernsback wrote, "When I coined the word 'scientifiction' in 1915, I knew that sometime or other it was bound to become popular, and I even cherished a secret hope that some day it might appear in a standard dictionary. In any event, 'scientifiction' is a word that will grow with the added years. As science advances, scientifiction will advance and flourish. No one of to-day can even dimly foresee what it may produce. There was a time when science made scientifiction. The time has already come when scientifiction makes science. The author who works out a brand new idea in a scientifiction plot may be hailed as an original inventor years later, when his brain-child will have taken wings and when cold-blooded scientists will have realized the author's ambition. An author may not know how to build or make his invention of a certain apparatus or instrument, but he may know how to predict, and often does predict, the use of such a one. The professional inventor or scientist then comes along, gets the stimulus from the story and promptly responds with the material invention. It may not always work out this way, but it is conceivable that it might in the future. The reason is that inventors and scientists, as a rule, have their noses close to the grindstone, whereas it takes an author with vision to see ahead and so to start others thinking along new lines. The inventor or scientist may not always admit the truth of this, but the fact nevertheless remains, that both are susceptible to all sorts of outside influences, more than they will admit even to themselves." The thought occurred to me, therefore, that what scientifiction needs at present is some sort of label—an emblem, or a trade-mark, so to speak. Scientifiction is too good a thing just to be used as a word in mere letters. It should have some dignity, and the idea itself of scientifiction should have its

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own crest, henceforth." At the top of the contents page of *Amazing* was a drawing with the caption, "Jules Verne's Tombstone at Amiens Portraying His Immortality."

In *Science Wonder Stories*, Gernsback used the word science-fiction, the term that has struck, but the concept was the same. On his editorial page Gernsback listed the names of various experts in astronomy, astrophysics, botany, chemistry, electricity, entomology, mathematics, medicine (Dr. David H. Keller), physics and radio (Dr. Lee de Forest, Ph.D., D.Sc.), physics, psychology, and zoology over the caption—"These nationally-known educators pass upon the scientific principles of all stories." Just the right note to convince Isaac Asimov's father.

The modern expression of Gernsback is Campbell's *Analog*. The analog in "*Analog*" is the link between science fiction, which appears over the title, and science fact, which appears under. The spine of *Analog* still carries a symbol shaped like a turtle with a spear piercing its shell, explained by John Campbell as meaning "is analogous to", between the words "science fiction" and "science fact". But Campbell has printed stories as remote from science of any sort as Anne McCaffrey's "Dragonrider" stories or my five hundred word fantasy "The Destiny of Milton Gomrath".

In the same way, whatever Gernsback may have said that he was publishing, what he published was very different indeed. Verne had repudiated Wells and Wells had separated himself from Verne on the very question of prediction and accurate representation of science. Gernsback printed them indifferently, usually both in every issue of the early *Amazing*. Gernsback not only published Edgar Rice Burroughs, he commissioned him to write *The Master Mind of Mars* and promoted the story heavily.

In the April 1928 *Amazing*, there is a box full of questions with a headline that says, "What Do You Know?": "Readers of *Amazing Stories* have frequently commented upon the fact that there is more actual knowledge to be gained through reading its pages than from many a textbook." The scientific questions that follow refer you for answers to the various stories.

One story is "The Way of a Dinosaur" by Harley S. Aldinger. Gernsback's story blurb says, in Gernsback's recognizable style, "Our new author has developed a charming tale, based upon accurate scientific knowledge, a story that despite its shortness, is highly interesting and gives us an excellent idea of the past and bloody age." The questions are, "What animal of geological times is supposed to have been the most destructive living thing that ever existed?" and "What is the origin of the name *Pterodactyl*?"

The story is not more than a thousand words long. It begins, "A mighty tree in that great primeval jungle of the Mesozoic Age was pushed aside, as you or I might lightly push aside a willow bush, and the terrifying head of Cayna, the tyrannosaurus, King of the Jungle, was thrust through. His little, red-rimmed, cold, reptilian eyes were blazing with hate and menace, for Cayna was in another of

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his blood-rampages that day, and woe betide the unlucky animals whom he encountered, no matter what their size and strength might be. It was a blood lust of a fierceness and wantonness, to which only Cayna could attain." And it ends, "Whipping frenziedly about, the great saurian bit the ichthyosaurus' head entirely off, in his rage, but at that moment an entire school of the bloodthirsty fish-lizards swept up, and the tyrannosaurus disappeared in a boiling, bloody, inferno. And thus Cayna, the king, went the way of a dinosaur, meeting the fate of all the bloodthirsty breed, sooner or later."

Another story is "The Yeast Men" by David H. Keller M.D. which is about a 19-- war (later given as 1930) in which Moronia defends itself against Eupenia with an army of Yeast Men: "Imagine a six-foot man of dough, with a crust hard enough to hold it erect, yet viscid enough to allow it to move forward. A creature with a head but no face, with spade-like hands without fingers, and instead of two legs and feet, simply—simply a body like a skirt, which rested firmly on the ground on a two-foot base. It was the convulsive movement of this base and the mass of fermenting yeast about it that in some way enabled it to move slowly over the ground."

The Yeast Men are the invention of an American named Mr. Billings. His explanation in full is, "It was like this, Your Majesty. They were just yeast cells but they were filled with a special dynamic energy, a very special form of energy. I could tell you all about it, but I am afraid that it would be hard for you to follow my technical explanation."

Gernsback says, "This month Dr. Keller comes to the fore again with a tale which will range easily as one of the best scientifiction stories of 1928. For sheer originality, daring of thought and uniqueness, this story is outstanding. It contains good science, for the Yeast Men actually could perform all the things that Dr. Keller so vividly portrays here. Modern warfare is very much as is described by this interesting author. Gas has been introduced only during the last war, and we may be sure that situations such as Dr. Keller depicts will come about soon enough." No questions in the box refer to the story.

Gernsback had a storywriting contest in the November 1929 issue of *Science Wonder Stories*. There were eleven rules, the first three of which were, "(1) A short, *SHORT* science-fiction story is to be written around the cover picture of the November issue of *Science Wonder Stories*. (2) The story *must* be of the science-fiction type; and should be plausible in the light of our present knowledge of science. (3) The story must be between 1,400 and 1,500 words."

Gernsback wrote, "The present contest is centered around this month's cover illustration. When I originated the idea for the cover, I told Artist Paul what it was all about; and he has done what, in my humble opinion, is a little masterpiece. I can give you no clues as to what the picture is all about, and you will have to use your own ingenuity in writing a story around it. The picture, I believe, speaks for itself. You are asked, then, to write a story around the cover picture; and the more interesting, the more exciting, and *the*

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more scientifically probable you can make it, the better. Remember, *anyone* can participate in this contest. Study the details carefully, and be sure that you do not miss ANY of the details of the picture; because they are all important."

On the contents page, under the Table of Contents, there was this additional note: "ON THE COVER this month is pictured the subject of our $300.00 short, SHORT story prize contest. Here we see some monstrous machine which has, evidently, torn the Woolworth Building and the Eiffel Tower from their foundations and transported them out into space; how the machine did this is not known, whether by gravity nullification or by some unknown rays. When consulted about the cover, and asked what *he* thought the picture describes, Mr. Gernsback assured us that he did not have the remotest idea as to what it is all about."

The full details of the cover, as nearly as I can describe them, are these: It is basically a deep blue in color with perhaps a hundred random dots of white. It says *Science Wonder Stories* in a postcard-sized white inset in the upper left, and under the inset, in small letters, HUGO GERNSBACK Editor. Dominating the picture is a red and yellow flying saucer which is holding what a check of the 1927 *Book of Knowledge* confirms is the Woolworth Building in four long mechanical looking tendrils which end in lighter colored balls, while at the same time it emits yellow-green rays in two other directions. Above this machine are the words "November", "25 CENTS, Canada 30¢", and, on a shield that just slightly overlaps the saucer, above a hand bearing a torch, the words, "A GERNSBACK PUBLICATION". In the lower right corner is another red and yellow flying saucer, also emitting two yellow-green rays, this one holding the Eiffel Tower, which I didn't need to check in the *Book of Knowledge*, in three tentacles. Below it are a full Earth, North America in view, and behind Earth a crescent moon. In the lower left corner is an orange circle the size of Earth with the words "$300.00 for the best short, SHROT story written around this picture," and, in small letters, "SEE PAGE 485", all very handsomely lettered.

As one who has twice had the pleasure of trying to write a story around a cover by Vaughn Bode, I can say that this contest seems to me a formidable challenge. I wonder how the full Earth-crescent moon relation was explained? I can only guess at the significance of the yellow-green light rays. I wonder if anybody got Gernsback's secret story right? I intend to search until I find the story that won the contest, if it was ever published. We shall see about this.

Gernsback was a naive man, as I think these quotations amply demonstrate. He, the man who invented the word "television" in 1909, believed "The author who works out a brand new idea in a scientifiction plot may be hailed as an original inventor years later, when his brain-child will have taken wings and when cold-blooded scientists will have realized the author's ambition." I do believe he would have taken credit for yellow-and-red flying saucers with the

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ability to kidnap the Woolworth Building should someone have been cold-blooded enough to have invented them.

Gernsback may have believed every word he spoke about education. I think he did. I may even be sure that he did. But the science of the stories he published bears as much relation to real science as the science of *The Skylark of Space* bears to the twenty years of scientific effort E.E. Smith, Ph.D. spent in trying to discover a way to make sugar stick to a doughnut.

We've swallowed one man's dream. We've taken one man's limited trip *seriously*. Gernsback was a man whose imagination expressed itself in terms of flying saucers with sufficient discrimination to hold for ransom the world's two tallest structures. He thought of this as Science, a superior version of the drudgery of the cold-blooded nose-to-the-grindstone scientist. This Coney Island of the mind is the reality behind the Gernsback theory we have honored for so long.

Gernsback is owed honor. His contribution to the body of existing science fiction—the facts—is a consistent, well-defined and generally useful vocabulary. Gernsback and the phrase-makers who followed him populated the new lands of space and time with hardware. Alter Gernsback's claim slightly and give him his due: "The author who works out a brand new idea in a scientifiction plot may be hailed as an original inventor years later, when cold-blooded writers make daily use of the author's brain-child."

But this is the necessary equipment to get about time and space. It isn't science. It is an aid to concreteness and rigor in fiction, but it isn't science.

So, in checking Gernsback, we find that he was playing Let's Pretend Science. Those writers like Hal Clement who have played The Game after Gernsback with greater skill and plausibility—they call it "The Game" and try to catch each other up in errors in rigor, in a most peculiar form of technical criticism—have and deserve respect. But they are more respected than followed in science fiction practice. Zelazny is clearly doing something different than Hal Clement. Pohl is clearly doing something different than Hal Clement. Silverberg is clearly doing something different than Hal Clement. Ballard, Brunner, Aldiss, Disch, Delany, Russ, Lafferty, LeGuin, Ellison and anybody else you can think of, including me, are all doing something different than Hal Clement.

There is no order of respectability. *The Dying Earth, The Sirens of Titan, Slan, The Space Merchants, The Stars My Destination, A Canticle for Leibowitz, Foundation, What Mad Universe* and *Lest Darkness Fall* are all as legitimate as *Mission of Gravity*. Each has its own style of rigor, its own inner consistency, and demands judgment on its own terms. An adequate theory of the literature of the metaphorical universes of time and space, the World Beyond the Hill, has to welcome all possibilities equally. Gernsback's Theory—"The Game"—is a partisan standard.

My alternative, *creative fantasy*, is not partisan. The standard is not accuracy, but inner consistency. Any individual work is self-justified or it

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cannot be justified at all.

Instead of "science", the stuff of creative fantasy is distance. The literature of time and space is a literature of distance: daydreams, nightmares, adventures, romances, satires, extrapolations, displacements, allegories, parables, speculations, games, polemics, visions, fables and myths. These, alone and in combination, are an anatomy of the facts of science fiction. This is what our stories are. There is no need to match story titles with these categories. We all know who we are and what we all write, and we are all equal, that is, equally justified in what we do.

Any story that sets itself in metaphorical time and space is welcome. Artful use of distance is its own justification. The test of creative fantasy is ends and means: what is the author's intention, what are his devices, how original, how apt, how successful? These are the critical grounds for trying to prejudge the judgment of history.

You cannot directly compare *Mission of Gravity* with *What Mad Universe*. Each has its own ambitions, its own rules, and its own relative success. But relative to what? Not to each other, but to their own ambitions. We can know little successes and large failures and appreciate them for what they are.

Creative fantasy includes all that has been published as science fiction since 1926. It also includes stories that we have all tended to include with science fiction, even though they were not conceived or published as sf. *War With the Newts, Brave New World, Out of the Silent Planet, Last and First Men, We.*

The SFWA bibliography published in the June 15, 1970 *Library Journal*, which I think is a description of creative fantasy, includes all the books named on these past few pages. It also includes Delany, Dunsany, Ellison, Heinlein, Herbert, LeGuin, Lovecraft, Orwell, E.E. Smith, Vidal and Zelazny. And it includes Tolkien.

Creative fantasy includes *The Glass Bead game*, and avda, or Ardo, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and J.G. Ballard, and Michael Crichton, and John Faucette, and John Barth, and Robert Silverberg, and Gordon Dickson, and Larry Niven, and Norman Spinrad, and Mack Reynolds and Joanna Russ. Good and bad alike, we are all legitimate.

I want to know what all that possibility is for. I am curious and ambitious as a writer. As a reader, I am hungry.

—Alexei Panshin

COMING NEXT MONTH

In the March, 1971 *AMAZING STORIES*— The novel everyone will be talking about *next* year, Hugo and Nebula Award-winner Ursula K. Le Guin's THE LATHE OF HEAVEN! This one *can't* be missed!

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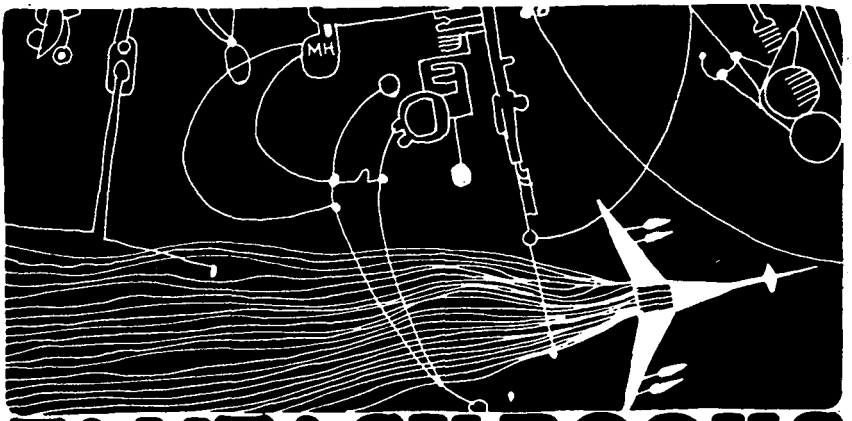

FANTASY BOOKS

reviewed by Fritz Leiber

ZOTHIQUE, by Clark Ashton Smith, Ballantine Books, 1970, xiii, 273 pp., 95 cents.

I met Clark Ashton Smith, the distinguished California writer of somber and grotesque fantasies with magnificent and beautiful backgrounds, one time only—the long afternoon of D-day in World War II. Not on some French beach, however, but in the old town of Auburn, relic of the gold-mining days, resting in the foothills of Donner Pass a space east of Sacramento on the road to Reno. I was taking a brief vacation in San Francisco from my footling inspection job at Douglas Aircraft in Santa Monica and devoting one day to meeting the semi-recluse poet, fantasy writer, translator of poetry from the French (Baudelaire foremost) and Spanish, sculptor, occasional fruit picker, and local journalist, renoun at least to the readers of the magazine *Weird Tales* and the books of Arkham House, then newly birthed but still surviving today when almost all its imitators and competitors have failed.

Smith met my bus. He was a man slight in build, but not in coolth and impressiveness. Garbed in white suit, Panama hat, and quietly colorful batik shirt, he struck me as a cosmopolitan, bohemian artist of the early century, very much out of place in his rural setting.

Soon reaching wooded ground, we tramped out of Auburn, meeting only a dashing car containing four nuns, which tickled Smith's sense of humor. After about a mile we reached a roadside clearing and in it his medium small house of unpainted wood. Before it stood twenty feet of a wall which was

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being slowly built by Smith out of local stones, the material also for his fantastic figures and demon heads, carved by jack-knife. We had a lot of urbane, artistic conversation and a bottle of wine. I also bought from him two of his relatively tiny rock sculptures and two of his drawings at a shamefully low price. After nightfall he walked me back to Auburn, treated me to a simple Chinese meal, and saw me onto my late bus.

Later I learned that one and perhaps crucial reason such a civilized man was anchored in Auburn was that he had devoted more than a few years to caring (to the end) for his ailing parents. Not that he didn't ever up-anchor. After his parents' deaths he made quite a few long visits to San Francisco and its environs.

But it was during this most difficult, "nursing" period—the late Twenties and early Thirties—that he wrote almost all of his fiction, practically all of his finest short stories, selling them chiefly to the pulp *Weird Tales:* tales concerned largely with death and a little with love, opulently decorated narratives generally set in decadent courts in far-off times and places with deranged monarches, malignant sorcerers, and usually doomed heroes and eerie heroines, fictions deriving a very little (and that perhaps) from Beckford, the unexpurgated Arabian Nights (Smith was anything but an anchorite, an ascetic), Poe, Bierce, and Dunsany, yet peculiarly Smith's very own. Perhaps "sardonic" is the most important adjective. Attempts have been made to show an influence of Lovecraft on Smith. He was indeed a member of the "Lovecraft Circle," but the two writers always corresponded as equals; in fact, Smith was the more finished artist, though I imagine they stimulated one another considerably.

Before and after his one big bash at fantasy fiction, Smith wrote poetry—with somewhat more emphasis on love than on death—and an occasional story.

Almost all of Smith's fiction, and certainly all his best, has been issued by Arkham House in small editions of 2,000 or so—six hardcover books, from *Out of Space and Time* (1942), now a costly collector's item, to the very recently published *Other Dimensions*—shorts and novelettes always, the novel never his *forte*.

And now at last Smith, via *Zothique*, appears in paperback with excellent layout and paper and strikingly handsome and appropriate cover art in the Ballantine "Adult Fantasy" series well edited by Lin Carter, who adds to the stories an informative Introduction and Epilogue.

Zothique is earth's last continent, a decadent and often barbaric area existing in the very far future—conceived of and written about by Smith decades before Vance's and Aldiss' tales of "the afternoon of earth." Carter has taken great pains to arrange the sixteen stories in chronological order. It is good to have in one volume all the Zothique tales scattered through the six Arkham books. Also, these sagas are a bit closer to heroic fantasy than Smith's other writings, though only one of them chances to fulfill completely the conventional formula for sword-and-

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sorcery: "The Black Abbot of Puthuum," wherein the comrades Zorbal the Archer and Cushara the Pike-Bearer with the worrying eunuch Simban adventure across wildernesses to procure the beautiful maiden Rubalsa for the harem of jaded King Hoaraph. On their return trip they cross a shunned desert and are forced to stay overnight in the haunted monastery of Puthuum. There they have various supernatural adventures, Rubalsa is almost raped from them by the gross and levitating abbot Ujuk, but in the end they dispose of their foes and all escape, with Rubalsa naughtily playing Cushara and Zorbal off against each other.

Zothique also contains several of my own most favorite Smith stories: "Xeethra", "The Charnal God" (also a swordy tale in which the young lovers survive), "The Last Hieroglyph" (a magnificently structured saga of doom), "The Isle of the Torturers" (which most shrewdly sets feigned love against agonizing death), "The Garden of Adompha" (wherein a callous and vastly erotic king has the most beautiful portions of his discarded loves—hands, eyes, breasts, etc.—grafted to enduring plants and flowers), and in particular "The Dark Eidolon," perhaps the finest of Smith's stories along with *The City of the Singing Flame, The Double Shadow,* and his science-fiction *The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis,* all set in other imaginary worlds than Zothique. It is an ultimate story of revenge, by the arch-wizard Namirrha on the degenerate emperor Zotulla and his favorite concubine Obexah, for a childhood injury which all but the sorcerer have long forgot. In the end not only all the characters but the city of Ummaos are totally destroyed. I can't resist quoting a bit about the procession, chiefly of giant skeletons and mummies, wherewith Zotulla and Obexah are summoned by Namirrha to feast with him in his vast next-door castle, built by magic overnight:

There is a chanting "And the cerements of the mummies stirred and fell open at the bosom, and small rodent monsters, brown as bitumen, eyed as with accursed rubies, reared forth from the eaten hearts of the mummies like rats from their holes and chittered shrilly in human speech, repeating the words. The skeletons in turn took up the solemn sentence; and the black and saffron serpents [which had hitherto been the skeletons' turbans—F. L.] hissed it from their skulls; and the words were repeated lastly in baleful rumblings by certain furry creatures of dubious form, hitherto unseen by Zotulla, who sat behind the ribs of the skeletons as if in cages of white wicker."

How do you top that?

THE DREAM-QUEST OF UNKNOWN KADATH, by H.P. Lovecraft, Ballantine Books, 1970, xi, 241 pp., 95 cents.

I never met Lovecraft, but I corresponded with him for the last eight months of his life. Very long and frequent letters—scholarly, chatty, cheerful, enthusiastic. One would never have guessed from them that he was already a dying man. Why, he

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even *solicited* from me any manuscripts of weird fiction and poetry I might have lying about (it was still three years until I would make my first sale), circulated them among several of his writing and correspondence cronies including August Derleth and Robert Bloch, and returned them to me with spelling, punctuation, and an occasional word-choice corrected—gratis, of course. He did more than anyone to firm me in my determination to write fantasy and to impress on me the importance of research, accuracy, and polish. He firmly believed in a sort of writers' Hippocratic Oath, such as doctors swear to but don't always follow, enjoining that he teach his art for free to promising apprentices. He rated his own writings low and criticized them mercilessly. Actually, I believe, he got more and more hung up on writing fiction during his last ten years, partly due to expanding correspondence and poorly-paid rewriting work, a tendency to make his stories longer and longer until they became short novels (an almost impossible form in supernatural terror, where the most the writer can hope to achieve is a brief surge of fright in the reader), and loyalty to *Weird Tales* and a conjoint aversion to writing science fiction, which last was caused chiefly (I imagine) by the very low and juvenile literary quality of almost all of pulp magazine science fiction for its first twelve years in this country. (Then came 1939 and John Campbell's editorship of *Astounding Stories* and *Unknown*. The next upward literary bump was around 1950, when Anthony Boucher launched *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction;* and Horace Gold, *Galaxy*. This was followed by Cele Goldsmith's brilliant editorship of *Amazing* and *Fantastic*. Another beneficial influence was the Milford Writers' Conference, begun in 1956 by Judith Merril, James Blish, and Damon Knight. But Lovecraft had died in 1937.)

Derleth initiated Arkham House simply to publish one distinguished omnibus volume of Lovecraft's best stories, which during his lifetime had never seen hardcover publication in this country, but appeared almost entirely in *Weird Tales,* ala Smith's. Incidentally, *Weird Tales* deserves a big medal for providing a passable market for almost all sorts of fantasy between 1923 and the emergence of *Unknown* in 1939, a period during which Americans were particularly insensitive and even negative to this branch of writing. By now Derleth has issued everything of any merit Lovecraft ever wrote, excepting the three remaining volumes of Letters.

The not-so-short (141 pp.) novel *The Dream-Quest* is a sidetrack, possibly inspired a bit by Dunsany's and Smith's stories, from the main road of Lovecraft's supernatural horror. It is the story of a long dream, or adventure in dreamland, of Randolph Carter, a character who is Lovecraft self-idealized—equally scholarly, prudent, and courteous, but more handsome, more wealthy, generally more soldierly and adventurous, and a more widely-traveled and worldly gentleman, though only in the most proper ways. More of him later.

Carter is in search of a supremely

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and poignantly beautiful city ruled by the feeble gods of earth. He has had only three sunset glimpses of it and then it was snatched from his dreams by the vastly powerful Other Gods. During the course of his dream-quest he traverses many grim and glamorous landscapes and seas, evades and is captured by many weird monster races, meets many charming cats, and finally—but no, I will not give away the effective, adult ending, which has some distant connections with the works of Thomas Wolfe, believe it or not.

On the very enchanting jacket Derleth is quoted, perhaps out of context, as asserting that *The Dream-Quest* is ". . . the finest weird fantasy ever written." I consider it seriously flawed, a mixture of a child's and an adult's book which never jells. It is no nearer *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Three Mulla Mulgars* than it is to Eddison or even Tolkien.

There are certainly childish elements in it: names such as Gugs, Zoogs, and Ghasts; the leap of an army of cats to the moon to rescue Carter from cannibalistic giant frogs and horned men; lines such as, "All they ever did was clutch and fly and tickle; that was the way of night-gaunts." Yet Carter remains throughout a man of middle-aged outlook, sober and cautious. He makes no real friends or foes, our emotions are not touched; there are no engaging animals, villains, even people with the tiny exception of his fellow-dreamer King Kuranes. In fact Carter simply walks through the entire story, alone and untouched.

Oh, the book is worth reading (I have done so several times) if only for its sinister landscapes, eerie forests, quaint towns, and occasionally more quaint monsters, and above all because of the fact that Lovecraft is always a considerably better writer than his detractors—including he himself—have proclaimed. There are even a couple of mildly chilling moments, as when Carter climbs the hidden and forbidden face of a mountain at dusk in search of the great rock-carven face of a god, and when he sails into the north polar regions in search of Kadath in the cold waste. But the ending drags, is anticlimactic and marred by a wholly inappropriate burst of Oriental pageantry. Nevertheless the book is certainly worthy to be in Ballantine's adult fantasy series. Once again, a good introduction by the series editor, Lin Carter.

Rounding out the book are five short stories on the same sidetrack, involving Carter or King Kuranes or merely atmospherically congruent material. Of these the most interesting is "The Silver Key," where in the real world Randolph Carter samples life in its various aspects, wearies of it all, and returns to his childhood home to seek the key to dreamland. Here we get Lovecraft's curious personal philosophy. The universe is without God, aim, or meaning; *hence* we should cleave to all traditions and the ways of our ancestors because, although surely untrue, they are the only available frameworks by which we may order our behavior, thoughts, and lives. To me a startling rationalization for conservatism! But typical of Dryden and Lovecraft's beloved Age of

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 115)

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4)

It's a story with all the usual Anderson hallmarks: carefully detailed extrapolations, hard-headed science, a romantic flair in the storytelling, and a sense-of-wonder twist. It's also something more than that: one of the most reasoned and reasonable extensions of our *present* culture into the day after tomorrow. I won't say more than that except to add that the "Byworld" of the title is an extrapolation of what is called today "the counter-culture." (And if you think you've got Poul second-guessed on his approach to the "Byworld" — guess again!) You can see why we had to publish it here, in FANTASTIC.

Speaking of which . . .

A reader in our letter column this issue (G.K. Fitch) takes me to task for straying afield from the narrow topic of science fiction in a recent editorial. He suggests I "stick to science fiction in the future and eschew politics." I wish I could, but it seems to me that there is a reasonable limit to the topics available under that heading, and that the broader world beyond sf is impinging upon our sf world each and every day.

After all, what is science fiction but an extension of the world we know into the future we do not know? Do politics stop when we set one foot forward into tomorrow? Obviously not. And equally obviously, politics affect us all, right here and now.

It is neither my desire nor my intention to promote my own private political beliefs in these pages. Yet, obviously, they color my attitude towards much of what I may wish to discuss. So let's get my politics out in the open and dispense with them, once and for all. Forewarned, you'll be forearmed and able to deal with what else I may have to say from a more knowledgable position.

Oddly, I am not a particularly "political" person. Friends of mine who have been, have chided me on this point on many occasions. I rarely use my fiction to make any political statements, and until recently my editorials were equally free of political sentiment.

To me, most politicians are a special breed of ass. Most seem to have subverted their intelligence (however much they were endowed with) into a narrow and divorced-from-reality world in which the object is to play a game called "Re-election." As a result, few lead their constituency in any moral or political sense, and most are more concerned with grinding personal axes than paying more than lipservice to their ostensible work. I separate Republicans from Democrats by their sets of irrational biases, and have very little to say for either. (I am a registered Democrat, because the Democratic primary in this city is where most of the action is. And I believe in intelligently exercising my voting rights.)

I've been known to observe that in many cases (the presidency, the governorship of important states, the mayorality of big cities) the office governs the man far more than the man does his office. There is, after all, a certain inertial quality to these positions: commitments already made by previous administrations, the bureaucracy of supportive departments, etc. In my short period as

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an aware adult, I've observed too many presidents enter their offices with stars in their eyes and Big Plans in their briefcases, only to knuckle under to the job and put in a performance not unlike the previous officeholder. Most often, the difference is in style, not performance.

In fact, politics, it seems to me, is governed by a special form of inertia—and the political beast is rarely capable of coping with any sudden and dramatic change. Subtle and gradual change slips right past him without even attracting his attention.

Take the war in Vietnam, for example. It began, from our point of view, in the mid-fifties, as an implimentation of our general cold-war foreign policy under Eisenhower. It escalated under Kennedy (and what is one to make of the recent "revelation" that he planned to pull us out—*after* the 1964 elections?), and even more so under Johnson. Nixon "had a plan" which disappeared immediately upon his inauguration—and the war still goes on.

I was not immediately and violently opposed to that war, five years ago. But as the strain of it has slowly but certainly uptilted our economy, exacerbated our politics and polarized our population, I have found myself more and more opposed to that war and any like it. Yet, I am not "political" about it. I am like my landlady, an elderly woman of Italian descent, who wonders why her taxes keep rising, her assets dwindling, the city becoming less and less "livable," and why we don't get the hell out of Indochina and spend our money where it's sorely needed—*here*. (My neighborhood—Brooklyn's Bay Ridge—votes solidly conservative on each election, but nobody I've ever spoken to is in favor of that war. Too many sons have died, too many pension checks have become inadequate.)

I'm the son of middle-class people. My name dates directly back to the *Mayflower*, and my roots are solidly sunken into the earth of this country. Yet, recent events have begun acting upon me, "radicalizing" me, if you will. These events are those political consequences which have served to act upon me. Some of them—Chicago, 1968—have moved me from afar (I was in Berkeley then, at the World SF Convention). Others—like the polluted air I breathe each day—immediately effect me. (I don't smoke, but the air I breathe is the equivalent of two packs of cigarettes a day. I made my decision not to smoke consciously and deliberately as an act of health. The fact that I am forced to "smoke" anyway as a consequence of political pettifoggery and commercial short-sightedness angers me more than a little.)

Intolerance and bigotry anger me, although I'm aware of their seeds within myself. It came as something of a shock to me to find—when I put my "liberal" ideals to the test—that there are whole classes of people for whom I have little use (mostly people who do not read and do not seem to do much thinking either). But I have no desire to see them discriminated against, and no desire to impose my will upon them. I suppose that I believe in an impossible ideal: a sort of anarchistic free society. I've never seen any proposal for such a

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society which I considered workable. In the meantime, I accept what we have as the best of a bad lot, and hope it won't get worse.

Like most people who prefer to think for themselves—however ineptly—I refuse labels. I am not a "Liberal," nor am I a "Conservative." I am neither a doctrinaire right-winger or left-winger. I find myself able to sympathise with the radical youth, while deploring the violence of their methods. (As an innocent by-stander, I have no desire to see me or mine blown up by bombs planted "against the state".) Mostly, I try to get along, mind my own business, and enjoy my life. When and however I am interfered with in this simple pursuit I am likely to rise on my hind legs and bare my fangs at the culprit . . . if he's identifiable and I'm able.

Basically, and by the standards of many of my friends and acquaintances, then, I am a pretty wishy-washy fellow.

Perhaps that's why extreme reactions to my "politics" as expressed in the pages of this magazine surprise and annoy me.

There's another phrase in Mr. Fitch's rather smug little letter: ". . . the frustration and rage of liberals . . ." Mr. Fitch did not specify the *cause* of this "frustration and rage;" he simply seemed to feel that it would "distort the most rudimentary caution or common sense."

I don't normally think of myself as frustrated and raging of course (nor as a "liberal"), but when I think about it, I suspect it's partly true. In recent years it has become a good deal harder to live one's life in peace and quiet. The incursions from without have grown more frequent and more irritating. A certain amount of frustration is inevitable, and perhaps even rage. But why? And against whom?

One gathers that Mr. Fitch disapproves of these emotions, or that at least he feels himself untouched by them. Again, why?

I walked into my local candy store (the one on Fourth Avenue and 53rd St., with the excellent newsstand) the day after the riot in lower Manhattan in which an organized mob of construction workers had beaten up students and bystanders while the police looked on. Talking to the counterman was a local longshoreman-type who bragged loudly of his role in that riot. He said he wished he could have shot the mayor (Mayor Lindsay was called "The Red Mayor" on the workers' well-printed signs and placards), and that he hated "them dirty kids who don't know nothin'."

Now *that* was frustration and rage.

And it simmers all around us, from my landlady bemoaning the doubling of her taxes, to the neighbors who had a Long Island woman arrested for flying her flag upside down. If this is a "liberal" phenomenon, I'd be most surprised.

Several issues back (in the editorial Mr. Fitch took such exception to), I labelled this frustration and rage "overpopulation paranoia." In the letters section this issue Phil Muldowney, who focusses an eye from some remove upon the problem, suggests I've oversimplified—and perhaps I have. It's certainly a complex issue, and the most I hoped to do was to attack it from a fresh viewpoint, to

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see what insights might be yielded.

And that, in a circular fashion, brings us back to science fiction, folks. Because that is one of the things science fiction is all about: extrapolation of problems into new perspectives. The alien eye upon us. Stepping back from among the trees until the shape of the forest becomes apparent.

It takes something we used, jokingly, to call "broad mental horizons." It takes a science-fictional way of looking at things.

Progress is an onrushing juggernaut, for better or worse. Our political system seems unwilling to deal with it, even when threatened with nationwide or worldwide environmental disasters. We need to apply new perspectives to these problems—and quickly. In only a score of years we may no longer be able.

If this be a "political" sentiment, then make the most of it. But let us not bury our heads so firmly in the future that the present crushes us unaware.

—Ted White

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19)

had "spells" and fits during which

LOS ANGELES: Moving briskly, all purpose, some vindication too; no recrimination, however, not for me, other things to be done, deeds to be won, corpses to be kissed, time to be known and then, OH GOD THE FEELING! the head splitting open, the feeling of seeds spilling from the filter of self, all heartspumpings moving the blood toward death and I fell, the floor a blanket, the stones a void and knew then as I had always known what it would be like, a feeling of familiarity, catching the lover death, the brother's shroud, picking it up and falling falling and knew then that

Something has happened to my brain I think

MOBILE: Oh boy we got the bitch.

JACKSON: Look at them twitch. I swear to you they almost look alive.

Dear Sirs:
My previous letter in relation to clinical aid has still not been answered and I fear now that

VIETNAM: The hot rockets, the

THE MOON: One small forward step and then

I thought the whole thing was for laughs

THE MOON: And dropped the bomb to make the dead bitch lurch.

—Barry N. Malzberg
December, 1969, New York

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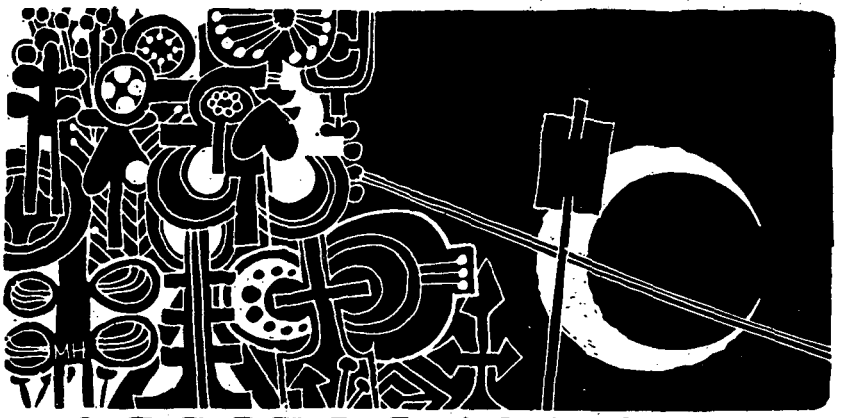

...ACCORDING TO YOU

Letters intended for publication should be typed, double-spaced, and addressed to According To You, *c/o Box 73, Brooklyn, N.Y., 11232.*

Dear Ted,

I have enjoyed FANTASTIC STORIES for a little more than two years now. I believe yours is the superior of the sf magazines now on the market. With artists like Jeff Jones, Gray Morrow, Mike Kaluta, Steve Stiles, Mike Hinge and Dan Adkins and writers like Lee Hoffman, David Bunch, David Mason and Bob Shaw how can you go wrong?

The main reason that I'm writing this letter is because of the beautiful covers on the June and August issues. Gray and Jeff did very impressive jobs. I believe they are the best two covers you've had since I began reading your magazines.

I know that you probably have a policy about giving fans your original art . . . but can't you make an exception just this once? I've never wanted pieces of original art so badly. What do you say? *Please?*

Bill Luton
3568 Philsdale
Memphis, Tenn., 38111

We do *have a policy, Bill, and that is that we* return *all original artwork to the artists. This applies to both the covers and the interior illustrations—and is the primary reason the artists you've named have done such outstanding work for us. Knowing that they will get their work back, to put on their own walls or otherwise use for themselves, they have knocked themselves out on each piece of art. Under the circumstances, we couldn't "make an exception" for you if we wanted to. It's not our decision to make. (I've answered previous such requests privately, but I hope this answer will stand for all of you who have written recently to request*

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artwork. —TW

Sirs:

Regarding the review *(by Fritz Leiber in our October issue)* of Peter Saxon's *Dark Ways to Death:*

Yes, there is a Peter Saxon, only his real name is W. Howard Baker, a prolific British author-editor-publisher who was the guiding spirit behind the Sexton Blake stories in the 1950's and early 60's (as well as the ones being published today).

J. Randolph Cox
(Reference Librarian)
St. Olaf College
Northfield, Minn., 55057

*Somehow, I like Fritz's computer theory better . . . *sigh* . . . —TW*

Dear Mr. White,

I found your editorial in the August FANTASTIC quite interesting, not only for the outlook on overpopulation but the insight into your own thought processes.

Overpopulation is a very real problem—in the purely physical sense alone. But are all modern day tensions caused by overpopulation? So we live in crowded cities, the cities have been crowded for a long time. If you are going to define overpopulation as too many people rubbing cheek to jowl, so venting frustrations and complexes on each other—then mankind has been overpopulated since he first moved beyond the mud village state. First century Rome to seventeenth century London were just as 'overpopulated' in their own ways. With the resulting tensions and murder. There is maybe nothing new under the sun. *(I agree. But it should be remembered that 'overpopulation' is an emotional state as much as a physical one. If you know that escape exists—whether a few miles away in the countryside or at the shore, or across the ocean in a new unpopulated land—'overpopulation' is bearable. It is then 'temporary'. But presently the world is filling up and the number of easily accessable places where one can 'get away from it all' are rapidly decreasing. Thus, a new, nationwide sense of 'overpopulation' develops.—TW)*

It is far too easy to ascribe the current problems that seem to be besetting your own society in terms of 'overpopulation' alone. Of course, more people will mean more friction, but 'tis not such a simple sum. There are many more places on this Earth more crowded than New York, yet far more relatively peaceful. *(Are there? I wonder. —TW)* Perhaps the problem lies part in your own society.

And now comes the typically anti-American tirade. Usually at least. But one cannot help question your own true, proud image that America seems to want to convey to the world. Of the *good* life, of the *great* society. Yet there seems more violence and tension in American life than in a good many other places. Are not perhaps some of our frustrations caused by the style in which one lives? Technological capitalism, the competitive society, the rat race, success measured in terms of wealth and cars—America has lead the world in its own brand of philosophy. Now, seemingly, America leads the world in escalating personal violence, and fratricidal friction. *(Do we? Or is this simply a matter of reportage? Here, I read about the Skinheads*

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beating up the Pakistanis in the London streets, and rejoice that we are free at least of that. I suspect that human nature is a poor respector of national boundaries, and that given the same stimuli, most people will react in much the same way. Bigotry, the competitive drive, etc., are all human componants, and few nations have been able to legislate them out of existance.—TW)

I simplify too much, but I suppose it is the best way to make a point. Maybe the time has come to examine our own societies in terms of goals and ultimate ends. Our present society seems to be chasing its tail, the quality of life more dictated by your social position, money and power; rather than by what type of human being you yourself are. Ours is perhaps a way, but maybe not the right nor the best.

Your subsistence farmer in India or China may have a passive philosophy (that is if he has any at all of course!). But who is to say which is the happier, the farmer or your go-go company executive?

But then perhaps you are being too pessimistic. A maniac murderer and a bloody minded taxi driver seem to have had a forceful effect on you. Drugs are possibly a way out, but I wonder. To flee to them as a palliative, a rest from the world, is it any better than ingrowing into your own mind and following those deep introspective trails that lead to madness? *(Not all do.—TW)* As a temporary crutch 'tis fine, but how long will it be before the temporary crutch becomes a permanent bed to which to retreat from the fears of the world? How many are strong enough to face the buffets of life without retreating to a lovely nirvana? I don't know, or pretend to.

John J. Pierce's Eschatological Romanticism is a fine sounding phrase! It positively drips intellectual superiority. He advances for once a non-polemical argument, but still it is the same old case of science fiction as he wishes to see it. I am not saying that his viewpoint does not have a certain validity, but he basically advances his own (and others too) of sf as the only tenable definition. Which is nonsense. Sf seems to be what you want it to be, of late many have been finding different mirror images there. More power to their elbow.

Much as one agrees with John Buckley that AMAZING and FANTASTIC are interesting and informative, I would hardly say they are mind-expanding as good girl company. But then maybe it's not the mind one is interested in. Still, one of his ex-girlfriends should buy him a dishwasher.

Peace. And thanks for a pleasant read.

Phil Muldowney
7, The Elms, Stoke
Plymouth, Devon, England

Dear Ted:

Your editorial in the October FANTASTIC has finally spurred me to write. I've been reading your pleas for the last few months from the editor's standpoint and I thought you'd like to hear a dealer's story.

I'm the assistant manager (read: glorified clerk) at the Kazoo Bookstore in Westwood, California (we are an affiliate of the Los Angeles *Free Press* newspaper). Westwood is the

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community which "serves" U.C.L.A., a campus of 30,000 students. These students *do* read sf, at least the ones who come into the bookstore. It is one of our best selling sections (after straight fiction and psychology). We also sell periodicals, and herein hangs the tale.

Los Angeles is served by Sunset News, a distributor with virtually a monopoly in this area. We have requested, asked, begged, demanded and even written and called asking specifically for both AMAZING and FANTASTIC and in the last six months the most we have received was a couple of your reprint magazines. This, I must admit, is not unique to your magazines, hence I don't suspect a conspiracy. I am afraid it is just monumental monolithic bureaucratic inertia and inefficiency. And this is true of distribution (i.e. monopoly, inefficiency) in most of the cities I am acquainted with. If you feel helpless, imagine how we feel—I have to buy your magazines at our (friendly) competitor, Paper Back in West L.A.

Distribution is our problem and I would guess it will be the cause of the death of all the remaining sf magazines, and the bitch of it is there are no alternatives I know of save perhaps working through the "underground" distributors which I don't think would work. I am afraid the final solution will be the paperback "magazines" and this bothers me most because I am an artist and it is the art that suffers the most. (An aside: I think the shrinking of the field and lack of art is one of the contributing factors in the growth of comic-fanzines and underground comix.) Paperback magazines will make it for one reason, distribution. It is simply more efficient, hence more profitable.

Michael Moore
25A Park Ave.
Venice, Calif., 90291

Have you considered ordering our magazines directly from us? It seems to me that the university-area bookstores represent an important outlet for our magazines, and I know our publisher is investigating distribution channels (which seem rather specialized and fragmented). In the meantime, perhaps the solution, in your case, would be direct ordering, just as with book publishers. TW

Mr. White:

I wish you would frame the following quotation (from the August, 1970, FANTASTIC) and hang it on the wall over your desk: "One must charge Nixon and his Attorney General with final responsibility for every recent death of those children who perished from heroin overdoses. *Signed: Ted White*".

This is a honey. No reason given for this statement, nor has it anything to do with science fiction—just a gratuitous tossing of another faggot on the blaze to inflame opinion. I now see what Agnew means when he refers to the distortions of the liberal press, and am sending him this little faggot for his own use.

Come to think of it, I don't think that the Pope has ever exorted anyone to breed, breed, breed. This seems a nice little distortion on your part, too.

To me this indicates that a few more years as printer's devil are needed before you take on the responsibility of

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an Editor. It also shows me the extent that the frustration and rage of liberals can distort the most rudimentary caution or common sense.

Why don't we try to stick to science fiction in the future, and eschew politics, huh? According to polls, you are going to affront about half your readers with this kind of crap.

G.K. Fitch
c/o U.S. Embassy,
Quito, Ecuador

By now I hope you've read my reply to the Rev. Dr. Deckard, in the December issue. It would seem to me that anyone who pretends to be as informed would not require elaborate footnotes in substanciation of obviously factual statements. As for the Pope, you're quite right, of course. He simply told a session of the U.N. that overpopulation was a myth, and insisted that birth control was unnecessary. He has also adamantly opposed almost all means for members of his Church to limit the size of their families. It was simple hyperbole that lead me to sum his rhetoric up as a call to "Breed, breed, breed." I'm pleased you forwarded my editorial to Mr. Agnew, however. Perhaps he will denounce FANTASTIC in the same breath as he does the New York Times *and other aspects of "the distorted liberal press." We could use the publicity. —TW*

Dear Mr. White,

I received the October issue of FANTASTIC in the mail today and haven't even had time to read any of the fiction yet, just the features—including your editorial.

Your editorial scared me. When the editor puts down his greatest fear—loss of publication—on paper, things are *bad*. Through my nine years of science fiction reading I have come to appreciate the perils of the SF magazine. I've seen magazines go bimonthly to monthly and back, one appear and disappear, and two turn to trash only to then become the best.

I'll tell you that your magazines are the best, not to praise you—you've more praise than you need—but to raise a question or two. If your magazines are the best (and this is my assumption), why do you seem to be in so much trouble? Why aren't the other SF magazines in as much trouble (or more), or are they? Let's throw *ANALOG* out of the picture. I think you'll agree that it will be around until Armageddon (and if JWC has any say, after that). Anyway, what would all those senior executives do without the *Barron's* of SF? Of the five remaining SF magazines, what seems to be happening?

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think that everyone is in the same financial boat as you, but I think the others have a little more to fall back on. They aren't talking about their troubles—although they have them—because one of them is publishing for prestige, and the other to provide the "more literary readers of the world" with dessert. I think that if these magazines were on the same weak foundation they would be screaming, too.

But this conclusion gives you as much consolation as a pat on the back for surviving a car crash, and being completely paralyzed. Let's see why SF magazines *are* in trouble. Distribution, as you state, is the biggest problem. I

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grew up on science fiction in a town named Three Rivers, Michigan (know where that is?). There were only two newsstands there, and they both carried *all* of the SF magazines. I missed no more than two magazines in a year. Each place received about six of each issue and usually sold more than half (sometimes all). There is good coverage *and* good sales. Later on I moved to the Detroit area. Let me tell you, there one either wore out his car or his shoes to get all of the magazines. No one store (that I found) carried more than two different publications. This meant traveling to four stores to get all of them (some where I risked life and limb every time I went there). AMAZING was carried in one store, FANTASTIC in another, while *ANALOG* got three out of four. That's *poor* distribution.

Why? First I'll say what it's not. Size. *ANALOG* tried that, remember? The retailer. In most places where magazines are found, it's only a sideline. The distributer comes in every week and either he or one of the store's employees puts them up. The majority of the retailers don't know the first thing about magazines (except how can we get enough of PLAYBOY).

However, the problem is first with the distributor. In most (if not all) places they have a monopoly. They don't give a damn if you don't like the way they work. I used to work in a drug store in charge of the magazine rack, and I had several rather violent arguments with the local distributor (the worst I've run into).

Secondly, the problem lies with the merchandise. The distributor *knows* SF doesn't make money, and since he's the boss, shoves the stuff under the rug. I bet that if you changed the names of your magazines to FANTASTIC CONFESSIONS and AMAZING ROMANCES and put a picture of Jackie (you-know-who) on the cover, your sales would more than double. But you want to sell SF as SF (sigh), so better forget that idea.

The specific problem with your magazines is their past reputation. When they almost died (before you took over) you probably lost a lot of distribution, and readers. If the distribution didn't improve when your magazines did, a lot of readers (most aren't, like myself, true fans) didn't know it. And they still don't.

The final problem, and a bigger one than you imagine, is the readers. First, there is, I believe, more overlap than one would think. True, a lot of *ANALOG* readers only get that magazine. The same is probably true of *F&SF*. These "fringe" readers buy the two above-mentioned publications purely on the snob-appeal they carry. You won't get these people to read your magazines no matter how hard you try. The majority of readers who buy *IF* and *GALAXY* and *know* about the revival of your magazines buy them, too. That gets us back to the problem of distribution (drat).

So much for your problems and why. What can you do about it? One, those readers (or would-be readers) who complain to you about poor distribution should (are you ready for this) *subscribe*. I think my calculations tell me you make more money from subscriptions. If these readers would get off their hindsides and do this, part of the problem would be solved. This

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would save the precious few magazines on the stands for someone else to stumble upon, and if this person likes it, you're getting somewhere. The *only* way to beat bad distribution is through subscriptions.

Secondly, let's look at the reason for the failure of science fiction magazine circulation to grow with the population. Since the average age of the American citizen is less today than ten years ago, I think it obvious that you're not getting to the people that count. For science fiction to survive, it has got to cultivate the younger generation. I think you'll agree that getting a businessman of above thirty to start reading SF is an almost impossible undertaking. The reason you've lost the younger set (college and above) is because they're either too busy worrying about the world or too broke for other reasons.

So where do you pick up new readers? In the high schools, that's where. What's the best place to get to these readers? In the school libraries. If you could get a mention of your magazines in one of the library journals, or even send out form letters to selected high schools in some of our larger cities, or surrounding suburbs, offering special rates on subscriptions to the libraries you might get somewhere. A statement of purpose of your publications plus a subtle hint that SF will stimulate the young mind in possibly a less violent—and more creative—direction would probably win over some librarians. I think you would be doing yourself and science fiction a great service. I feel that once you get a young mind (mine used to be) started on SF, they stay hooked for life. All you have to do is get the early exposure and *zowie*.

I hope that the ideas I've given above, if not to your liking, will stimulate an idea in your head. I want to see your magazines survive, too.

Good luck to you, Mr. White.

Spencer R. Lepley
CMR 159
Moody AFB, Georgia 31601

While I think most of your points are sound, and well-put, I don't believe that the distribution problem can be wholly bypassed. Subscriptions are an *answer, but not* the *answer. If we were to rely wholly upon subscriptions, for instance, I doubt we'd survive longer than the length of the average subscription. The reason? Newsstand (or bookstore) display is essential in gaining the exposure that brings in new readers. Your suggestion about highschool libraries is a good one, and I'll see if we can do something about it. But, unfortunately, what you are really suggesting is a strong promotional campaign, of which that would be a necessary part. Such campaigns cost a lot of money—and more than we have to spare. Thus, one of our dilemmas: The only way to put sf on a solid financial footing is to be there in the first place. —TW*

Dear Ted,

I'd like to make some comments on a few different things in the August FANTASTIC, hoping they prove to have some cohesive relationship.

First, in answering Alex Krislov's protest against my statement (in Fantasy Fandom in the April issue) proposing that the s.f. novel is ideally a higher form of art than the mainstream

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novel—largely, I feel this is a matter of misunderstanding. To reiterate: "mainstream" is a dangerously vague term. I used it in the sense of the "traditional" (mainstream) novel—the traditionally-structured, contemporary, generally socially-oriented novel, about the "real world". (I feel it only fair to mention that I *did* invoke Norman Spinrad's review of *Stand On Zanzibar* in which it seemed clear that he made a similar assumption—I was attempting to briefly restate and enlarge upon Mr. Spinrad's argument. Perhaps Mr. Krislov had not seen the review.) The two examples of Dos Passos and Joyce that he raised I do not consider in the same class. They are separated from the traditional by their "radical" formal structures, though to an extent the subject matter of their artistic concerns does not. This is not quite "creating a world" in the same sense as (I meant) in s.f., but I will not belabor the point. Even Joyce in his success did not single-handedly invent a new form of language—there were other writers trying similar experiments around the same time, and the "stream-of-consciousness" concept was somewhat anticipated by Arthur Machen in "The Hill Of Dreams". But to return, and re-interpret again—literary art in both "camps" requires what may be called "transmutation". The "traditional novel" must select elements or details from the real world context, arranging them in patterns that have verisimilitude but are destined for purposes aesthetic and illuminative—this is a transmutation. The "s.f. novel" often requires a double transmutation—the elements are organized into patterns, but also, the elements themselves can be (and are) transmuted through extrapolation, projection, creative/intuitive "reshaping" and "translation", and what-have-you. Hence the creation of worlds, triggered by the present, which bear varying degrees from great-to-little "relevance" to the solid-fact elements of our world.

". . . And the writer's "freedom" (though I'm not wholly sure of the sense in which Mr. Krislov employs the term) does not lie exclusively in his abilities. In the most literal sense, the s.f. writer isn't stuck with the paraphernalia of the largely contemporary world. This is simple fact, but somewhat trivial when compared to limiting attitudes toward the artistic impulse. Much of what s.f. deals with (and its ways of dealing) may not be considered important (to, and as, art) by the mainstream writer (the traditional novelist here). This involves an emotional commitment and outlook which can influence the writer's freedom. If, in the face of the entire universe (of possibility), the writer commits himself to the contemporary world as *the* area of important and significant writing art, then he has made a choice. (S.f. writers pursue their craft because they somehow believe what they write and how they write have importance of one kind or another.) He can read every (text)book possible informing him of the vastness of the unplumbed universe, but it is so much lip-service and virtually non-existent if he chooses to ignore it, and make the universe the interactions of his current social/cultural milieu. You can't have

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freedom (and write with a kind of freedom) if you don't believe or think it exists, and that you have it. No judgments on "merits" passed here, just a matter of relative freedoms.

To go on: I found John J. Pierce's article a pleasure to read, just about his most lucid, effectively-structured "position" statement ever. However, I still can't agree with his espoused "plans" for s.f. Most exasperating are some of his exclusions of what he considers not to be s.f. (some mainstream critics pass similar judgments on works that "appear" to be s.f.). Negations of s.f.-labelled books and types of writing accumulate—s.f. is not social protest (Ellison), is not surrealist nightmare (Ballard), is not allegory (Anthony), is not private experience fantasy (Delany) and, from other sources we can add, is not poetic, is not social satire, etc.—then what is left for it to be in a colorful, distinctly characteristic fashion? I think s.f. is a form which can yield expression to all these things; they should be considered as descriptive qualities of writing and ways of fulfilling the task of writing rather than rigid literary compartments. (Even his scope of s.f., which he proposes to limit to Eschatological Romanticism, produces works which have these qualities.) I find almost "offensive" the judgment that Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* is a fantasy related largely to private experience (anyhow most writers' work embodies "private experience" in any number of ways). Perhaps Mr. Pierce can say this because he considers that s.f. "must be a 'rationalist' literature", whereas Delany's book works from an intuitive vision to a large extent.

And this is where Mr. Pierce's view of s.f. as literary art is opposed by Alexei Panshin's view (and even my own). As Mr. Panshin explains in no uncertain, very lucid terms (better than I can), in s.f. as literature, information is subordinate to intuition. (Thank you, Mr. Panshin. Actually, in this current installment of *SF In Dimension*, I found myself more and more in amazed agreement with the things he says.)

To conclude on Mr. Pierce, he attempts at length to sketch out the precise "nature" and "function" of s.f. (suited to the position of his organization). It isn't as clear-cut as that: how many can agree in clear detail on the nature and function of art, per se? Why can't it be couched in general terms, as the probing of the parameters of human experience—physical, mental, spiritual, and otherwise perceptual? This seems to me a distinctively need-fulfilling function/activity of human beings, just as the rest of Art-with-a-capital-A is. And, in light of all that s.f. implies, it should seem to hold a major (not limited) position in artistic endeavors.

Enough said. It was really an ingenious stroke to place both articles side-by-side in the same issue: quite illuminating.

Jeff Clark
48 South Lawn Ave.
Elmsford, N.Y. 10523

Dear Mr. White,

Michael Juergens' idea in the Oct. 70 FANTASTIC is a good one, and it deserves to be brought to the attention of some con committee. (Boston, are

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you there?) But there will be at least one real problem, that of deciding which category some books fall into. *Pavane* is an example of what I mean. Is this book science fiction or fantasy? I was inclined to view it as science fiction, but I think Juergens regards it as fantasy. Possibly the best solution is to give out the fantasy award at the worldcon, as Juergens suggested, and to have the fans decide by nominating a book or story that could be one or the other for whatever award they feel it deserves. If a book gets more nominations for the fantasy award than for the sf award, let it be considered for the fantasy award, and *vice versa*. It is probable that a situation such as I've mentioned, in which one book or story is regarded as sf by some and as fantasy by others wouldn't happen very often, which would minimize the problems this way of deciding might otherwise have.

There is no problem, however, when it comes to selecting a name for the fantasy award. What else could a separate fantasy award be called but the *Hughost*?

As far as the distribution problems of the sf magazines are concerned, I have no sweeping overall solution to offer. However, have you considered a special effort to reach the one audience most likely to buy, read, and enjoy magazine sf? I refer, of course, to college students.

Of Springfield's five colleges, two offer what seems to me a good possibility of increased sales. These are a small liberal arts college with about 1,000 students and a state university with several thousand enrolled. The other three are Bible colleges, and they offer at least a possibility of increased sales. To the best of my knowledge, none of these colleges offers any sf magazines for sale at any newsstand or bookstore on or near campus.

I don't know just what problems would be involved in getting the colleges of Springfield to carry your magazines in their student unions, coffeehouses, or bookstores, but I feel that the possibility is at least worth looking into. If I thought you were at all interested, I would go and inquire myself.

In a recent article in SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW 38, you stated that all the sf magazines were in this slump together. Have you considered a cooperative effort with the five other sf magazines to reach the college campuses? Have you considered placing ads for FANTASTIC and AMAZING, for *GALAXY* and *IF*, for *FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION*, and for *ANALOG* in the college papers? Science fiction's greatest potential market surely lies on the college campuses. Why not consider trying to reach it?

Jeffrey May
Box 204 M.P.O.
Springfield, Mo., 65801

As you will have noticed from previous letters, yours is one of the most often made suggestions we've received, and we're looking into it. Anything you—and our other readers—can do in your area (not only for us, but for the other magazines as well) will certainly be appreciated by all of us. —TW

Dear Ted White:

I was a little disappointed with the cover on the Oct. FANTASTIC; to tell

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you the truth, I think I've been *spoilt* by the ones Jeff Jones does! It's not that Gray Morrow is a bad artist, but that he just doesn't seem to have the ability—the *feel*—for fantasy the way Jeff Jones does. Jones could draw almost anything, and give it a aura of the fantastical, while Morrow would have to stick to drawing an elf, witch, or something like that . . . By the way, I'm glad you don't always stick to the policy of having a cover that relates to a story inside; an interesting cover is good enough in itself.

The title debate seems to have simmered down. I liked "Fantastic Visions"; or how about "Fantastic Horizons"? I was even intrigued by the suggestion of fanTAStic (I guess anything odd like that would appeal to me!); almost anything would be better than "Fantastic Stories." That's such an ordinary, unimaginative sounding title—it's more of a description than a title! I don't know whether a new title would attract any customers, but at least it would less likely to scare them away.

Your editorial was—well, *frightening!* Matter a fact, almost unbelievable. I certainly had expected sales to improve—you wouldn't think that a 10¢ increase would affect sales that much, especially when many paperbacks sell for much more . . . And think of all the new customers you must have gained! I never bought FANTASTIC when most of it was reprints; and I'm sure a lot of your other readers didn't, either. I would think that you could only be *gaining* readers . . . Perhaps you're being a little impatient; the new covers haven't been around that long, and it takes a little time for people to become aware of a "new product"!

You certainly are right about Alexei Panshin's column being the most controversial item in FANTASTIC. Already, I can feel the blood boiling inside of me!

Mr. Panshin's comments concerning fantasy and science fiction are pretty good, and I agree that there are a lot of areas that sf could expand into; but he should remember that sf is the *borderline* between fantasy and reality—it's a mixture of both. Thus there are certain things you can do with sf than you can not do with mainstream fiction or pure fantasy.

He also seems to have coined a new label—"creative fantasy." I don't mind that—it doesn't matter what science fiction, fantasy, speculative fiction, etc., is called, just so long as it is distinguished from "mainstream" fiction. It simply isn't that. Kurt Vonnegut was on the Dick Cavett show several months ago, and said something to the effect that "anything that deals with machines, even if it's human robots, must be considered as science fiction." He doesn't classify himself as a sf author simply because it's more profitable in the mainstream.

I don't like the way Mr. Panshin knocks the sf short story. In his first column (in the June issue) he says: "I think the science fiction short story is an irrelevance that deserves to disappear." All I can say is "why?" What automatically makes a sf short story inferior to sf a novel? I agree that science fiction shouldn't be limited to short stories, but isn't Mr. Panshin being a little harsh in his criticism? The short story has limitations—as does the

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novel. But remember—*they both don't set out to do the same thing.* Just like the purpose of a sf novel is not entirely the same as that of a mainstream novel, so the purpose of a short story is not the same as that of a novel. In his eagerness for longer science fiction novels, Mr. Panshin condemns the short story . . . I guess I've gone a little overboard here, but it's just that I don't regard the short story a "limitation"—it's simply another form of literature, that's all.

Cy Chauvin

17829 Peters
Roseville, Michigan

And that does it for another issue. I want to thank those among you who have already begun typing your letters double-spaced—this allows me to use them as you've typed them, saving me the additional task of retyping them, and definitely increases your chances for seeing your letter in these pages. The result, as you've already noticed, is a longer and more representative letter column. —Ted White

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25)

That was how she vanished. I saw nothing but air before me. She had gone. Just like Mad Billy—but Billy always reappeared somewhere else, and Nancy was not bound to one time as he was. Instinctively I knew she was a lifetime away—my lifetime.

I was alone on the grass. Nancy was gone. The miracle had happened once, and could never happen again. Over an hour went by before I started walking slowly back to the mill.

Now I have settled back into the routine of life as if Nancy had never reappeared. I write more poems than ever, and King Andrew likes my work, so I may be Poet Laureate yet. His Majesty especially enjoyed my "Visions of Snowdon," although he thought the style a trifle inconsistent. I'm now working on his biography, written in blank verse, and if that doesn't get me the title nothing will. But I cannot write poems all night; I have to sleep, and when I sleep I dream. She is there, standing before me outside the ruins, her face grave and serious, and when I reach out for her she fades away.

—David Redd

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 111)

Reason, I'm told.

Elsewhere, in an artistic connection, Lovecraft has asserted that the skeptic and materialist is apt to make a much better writer of fantasy and supernatural horror stories than the believer in the occult. The latter takes weird wonders for granted and tosses them at the reader without preparation—much as, for other reasons, in many cheap films the monster is shoved on screen during the first minute and without warning—while the former (the skeptic) realizes that it will take the most artful preparation and atmospheric touches if only "a momentary suspension of disbelief" is to be achieved. This I have generally found most true. —Fritz Leiber

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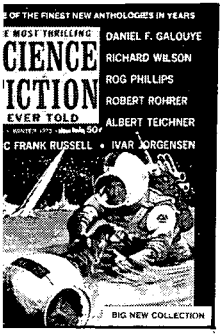

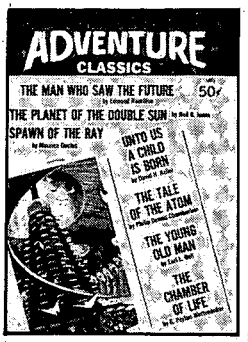

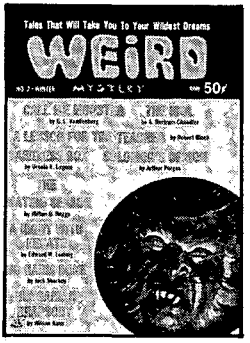

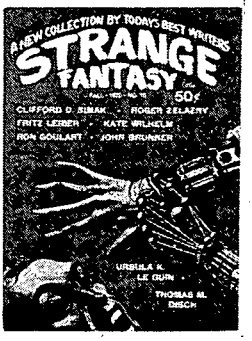

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STENOTYPE
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- ☐ Dental Assistant
- ☐ Interior Decorating
- ☐ Real Estate
- ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Stenotype

Mr.
Mrs.
Miss ..... Age ....
(Circle title and please print)

Address ..... Apt. No. ....

City & State ..... Zip .....

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01D

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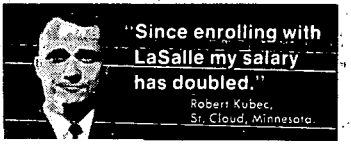

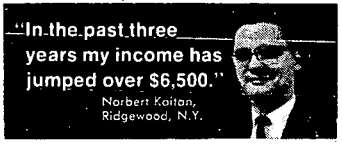

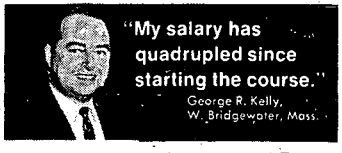

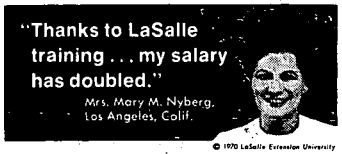

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